

BERGEN BELSEN AND BEYOND:

*MEMOIRS OF
HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR*

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UNFINISHED DRAFT

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INTRODUCTION

April 4, 1989, on a bright Tuesday morning. Today is the day to begin with the fulfillment of a long-neglected dream of mine, and write! As far back as my memory reaches - being only a young child of four or five years old - whenever I could hold just a pencil and a piece of paper I scribbled. Then overcome with a rich joyous feeling that made me happy to the roots of my very soul. Just the mere use of a pencil on a scrap of paper! Those bygone years full of dreams about a bright future!

All the while weaving faithfully my promising rosy dreams - the greatest destruction on earth was ready to descend, set to annihilate millions of innocent lives, their laws and beliefs. Destroying all that human law stands for. Wiping out the last spark of hope in the human soul. Its aftermath left the world in shambles.

Oh how longingly I awaited to go to school and study, to become knowledgeable and to be able to use pen and paper intelligently, to touch mind, heart and soul of all mankind.

Oh how I want now to reach through my writing to the soul and mind of mankind, have them change the whole world to a better one, more peaceful and meaningful for all. To create a different kind of human behavior, a brand new world where no one builds his life goals and happiness on the destruction of other human beings. A world that knows no hatred, neither jealousy nor cruel and heart-rending wars. I so wish for the existence of a world that erases the last flame of hatred from the human soul! All this may seem a childish dream, but because I so wish for a better world, I do believe it may come true - if only all mankind wants it. By each of us following the righteous path and just obeying human law! Then it would happen, my dream would become a reality.

FAMILY ORIGIN

My mother, her maiden name Fanny Weis, was born in Ploesti to her mother Weis (nee Lichtag) Roza and her father Weis Samuel (for him this marriage a second one; from his first marriage there was a girl named Bluma who lived with her grandmother on her late mother's side). My grandfather from my mother's side was a chazan (cantor), and a son of the tzadik David Leib Weis from Hajdunanas. Because of his profession, they sometimes wandered from place to place. I heard that my cantor grandfather was invited to the court of the Romanian king to sing; he had a pleasant voice. Thus, when my mother was born, they lived in Romania in the City of Ploesti where my grandfather Samuel Weis worked as a cantor. Shortly after she was born a pogrom broke out against the Jewish people, so my grandparents fled the country immediately and returned to Hungary .

My Father David Bleier was born in the city of Tisza-Csege; his mother Eva (nee Lichtag). My paternal grandfather was Moshe Itshak Bleier (son of Menachem Bleier a rabbi of the City of Tisza-Igar for 45 years). About my paternal grandfather all I know is that he earned his degree as a rabbi, but did not follow this profession; he wished to earn his living by working - whatever that means. My two grandmothers were sisters, and my parents were first cousins. Moshe Itshak Bleier, my late grandfather, died of pneumonia in 1915.

My paternal grandfather had his first engagement party with my maternal grandmother, there he fell in love with my paternal grandmother, so he busied himself to find a husband for his fiance - it took some time but he finally found one! Then he got married with his fiance's sister! What a clever young man my grandfather was!

Both my paternal and maternal grandfathers passed away at an early age, leaving their widows with about a dozen children, with the youngest less than ten years old. But both my witty grandmothers succeeded to bring up their children well-educated and honest citizens in the country where they were born and grew up to manhood .

In 1924 my parents met as young cousins - and soon they became a married couple. After their wedding day they moved to a very small town called Hencida, located in Hajdu-Bihar county. There my eldest brother, myself and a younger brother were born (also a sister who was the second child, but sadly enough returned her angelic soul to her creator while still in infancy).

HENCIDA

The short years we lived in Hencida I was too young to remember; what I do know is what I heard from my parents.

One little story is from when my younger brother was born. I was about an eighteen month old baby walking in the backyard of our home by myself, and promptly fell into a deep ditch of lime! Noting my hollering, my maternal grandmother came to my rescue. She came to stay with us for a short while to help my mom at childbirth. It was about this time that my parents also hired a maid-helper who shamelessly stole my gold earrings from my small earlobes!

The next episode in Hencida was when my three-year-old brother Alexander (Sanyi) played with an axe and pieces of wood: (we used to make thin pieces of wood and play with them in place of real toys). As I tried to pull a thin piece of wood, my brother chopped on the second finger of my right hand. That left me with a reminder for the rest of my life! My father took me to the doctor, who washed my injured finger with strong alcohol and bandaged it - no more. That was supposed to take care of the healing. My father used to remind me later years what a brave little girl I was then. I did not even cry when the doctor treated my injured finger with strong alcohol.

My parents also told me about a poor old Jewish couple who lived in a dilapidated small house in Hencida. One night a thief stole into their house, and the wife told her husband she was fearful about the strange noise so close. The husband quieted her down - they hardly dared to breathe for fear that the Christian thief may harm them. So when the thief finally left them, they thanked the Almighty for leaving them unharmed - at least bodily.

NADUDVAR

Family

Shortly we moved from Hencida to a somewhat bigger town - Nadudvar. The name of this town has a meaning; - "Nad" means reed, a green stalk that grows in the river, and "udvar" means court. A small river flowed through this town, included some of the backyards of the houses. From there is its name Nadudvar - reed-court. The green reeds grew in the backyards. Most people benefited from this by making brooms from the green reed, mostly in winter when there was not much to do on their farm.

Here in Nadudvar we had a big branch of the family from my father's side. We were very close to them. My grandmother was still alive and had a small house-paint store .

My grandmother lived then with two of her unmarried daughters. The older one, Fanny had her own delicatessen. She soon married a press maker and moved to the city of Debrecen, but never had any children. Later on, in 1944, both found their life end in the crematorium flames of Auschwitz.

The youngest daughter Sara got married to a good looking man with bad morals. They produced one nice little boy named Tomi. The marriage could not last long, her husband being unfaithful. She left him and they later divorced. She left her little boy with my grandmother and used to work as a housekeeper for a Jewish family. Later on my grandmother, my divorced aunt Sara and her little son Tomi moved to Hajdu Bosormeny. Their everyday worries did not last too long, because they, too, with many other relatives, perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz !

My aunts Rozse, Etus and Laura - all three of them married with children - also lived in Nadudvar, as did uncles Erno and Reszo with their nice families. My uncle Adolf lived in a different city, Kal; He was married with two daughters. My uncle Miska was married with four children and also lived in Kal.

My youngest uncle, Aladar, lived somewhat far away in a small town, Homadi[?], where he obtained an occupation by apprenticeship. When he became his own master he got married; they were blessed with one

beautiful boy Tomy (who later together with his mother and a half-sister perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz in 1944).

Carefree Childhood

We lived in Nadudvar around four years. Some of my memories of those years stand out very clearly in my mind till this very day. As I look back at my childhood years, I can say that they were happy worry-free years of full freedom for a child between the early years of 2-6 (after that we moved again to another town).

I have some nice and some sad memories. Mostly I grew up with my two brothers and three boy cousins. They were my closest friends and my constant companions. Sometimes we played with a gentile neighbor boy also about our age, George O-Nagy.

With my little band, we liked to roam around in the little town of Nadudvar from early morning till twilight. My elder brother Sanyi was our leader, and we followed his orders - whatever his witty mind conjured up. One day he suddenly decided that we should visit our grandmother Roza, who lives far away in the big city of Gyor. So we went to the train station, where the station manager asked us what we were looking for. We told him proudly that we wanted to go to Gyor to visit our grandmother. He told us we were already there, "so now kids, go home fast". That we did, when we suddenly lost our way home, until I finally found the right direction .

We did not have any toys to play with, so we invented things with which to enjoy ourselves during our free time - that we had plenty of at this time!

Here I went to a kindergarten that I liked. Our teacher was a nice lady but I don't recall any friends there. I just remember one day a little boy, Sanyi Gold, wrongly reported me to the teacher and I had to stay in a corner for a short time as a punishment. I felt very humiliated and never spoke to him again.

Foreshadowing the Looming Disaster

Despite the seemingly happy years of freedom - there subconsciously loomed a descending catastrophe, with the constant fear, humiliation and degradation the Jew had to live with in Europe. We were a tormented, tolerated, unwanted and hated population in those countries.

Because we were of a religion strange to their own and we prayed from the Hebrew prayer books, we were not wanted - only tolerated. But we, the Jews, hid our heads in the sand like an ostrich. We did not wish to face the reality of our fate in Nadudvar.

One day, coming home from the kindergarten with a gentile girl, we saw a bearded Jew (whom I personally knew) walking in the street. He was the cantor at our Jewish Temple, Mr. Blau. Suddenly, the gentile girl told me to hurry up and run fast - we have to run because this Jewish man with the beard will kill us! I became so shocked from her degrading words that I could not say a word. Stunned, I became speechless, and the blood froze in my veins. A deeply felt horror overtook me because of this senseless humiliation! Oh, how could they be so ignorant, to educate a child of a delicate age to hate so much, to alienate their young children from their fellow human neighbor by such unheard lies. They poison the souls of their own children with the seeds and flames of hatred against other human beings - and innocent ones at that!

Aunt Roza's Courtyard

My aunt Roza also had a very big courtyard with beautiful green grass. The river flowed on both sides of the courtyard. In the summer we bathed in the river; in winter, when the river froze to ice, we enjoyed ice-skating on it. I joyfully recall how we once took off all our clothes and splashed about naked in our backyard river, with the people outside staring at us! In the spring, when the [akac] tree was blooming, we kids would climb on it and taste the fragrant white flowers.

I remember even in the winter climbing high up our [Eper] berry tree - my mother's jam sandwiches tasted best there! We marveled at every flower we saw. With our skinny hands we would find a little hole in the barbed-wire fence to tear off sweet smelling flowers and enjoy their fragrance. Then we would run after butterflies with their hypnotizing colors; when we were lucky, we would catch one.

All those little things - how happy they made us feel!. We sometimes busied ourselves by catching frogs; how could I touch them? But then it was interesting. We kept them in matchboxes so that they would not jump away.

Some gentile people would "borrow" Aunt Roza's courtyard for their horses or goats to graze. One afternoon, when no grown-ups were around us, my little gang took a small dish, and pulled a goat inside the storeroom. They milked the goat and declared that I had to drink the milk, because milk is for girls. Since I was the only girl in our gang, I drank it! People never again brought goats to our courtyard to graze. Of course we were reprimanded.

More Mischief

My brother Sanyi liked to tease anyone and everyone. He especially enjoyed teasing one of our second cousins, Imre, who was somewhat older than us. His favorite taunt went like this: [Imre gasda- buy a gasba - ott egy diszno rugd - odalba]. Translated to English: Master Imre hide in the woods - there is a pig - beat at its side. Then our cousin Imre would turn very angry and beat up my brother, but nothing would help - not his anger nor the beatings. My brother would not forego his joy of teasing Imre.

We liked to wander around our little town of Nadudvar. My brother Sanyi, who was always our leader, always found some mischievous deeds that we all happily joined in doing. We liked to sit like kings on high orchard fences or garbage dumps. We accepted all the risks that went along with our wild behavior - people sometimes reported us to our parents and we were spanked, but to no avail! Nothing scared us off.

Those happy years with mischievous deeds! There were those long summer Sabbath afternoons when everybody took a nap, but not us kids. Silently we stole out of the house wandering through the marketplace, where we even made our own merry-go-round. When we had enough, we just roamed the streets to the outskirts of Nadudvar. There we claimed we were already in a different city called [Berettyo-ujfalu], where our cousins the Elfenbeins moved some time ago.

Daddy's Girl

From early childhood I felt a deep, soul-bending closeness to my father. It was like an inner instinct in my subconscious that told me I had to grab every minute that Providence allowed me to be with my father. He was sunshine in my soul, a special happiness that was unmercifully cut short by the devilish Nazi hands!

On the Sabbath and holidays I would go with him to the synagogue and sit quietly with reverence and awe. Beside him I felt the holiness of the place.

One weekday my father, as usual, had to attend his business. He could not take me with him, but I insisted to go with him at least until the first corner of our street (I usually fought for my wishes). When he left me there I could not find my way back home. Somebody walked me back to the police station where one of the policemen recognized me as one of the Bleier children. Thus, my parents got me back - their lost child. At this stage of my life, ages 3-6, we had the most freedom that a child could have. We really took full advantage of it with great enjoyment.

As I look back, some of our mischievous deeds should have been controlled by the grown-ups. Children at that delicate age do not always have the right judgement, even if we preferred not to be reprimanded or yelled at.

Once cold fall day I remember wandering by myself at the far end of our backyard garden. I dug out of the soil a vegetable [(rescoka)] that we kids liked to eat uncooked. With a rusty blade I found, I cleaned and peeled it. Suddenly I cut my finger, and the blood rushed from the wound. I was so scared of my mother reprimanding me, that instead of asking her for help, I tore off a piece of my underclothes and bound my injured finger with it. I tried to hide my wrongdoings from my parents.

We sometimes overheard our parents talking about the private life of one of our neighbors. The wife was unfaithful and did not want any more children, so her husband would beat her up from time to time. One day we walked in front of their house. From inside came the cry of the wife and the yelling of the husband. Their only child, Robert, sat and cried outside the front door. We, should not have, but asked him why he was crying. He did not answer us, just blushed red all over his face.

Brother Lajos – God Rest His Soul

At this time we had a baby brother Loy (Lajos). There was a beauty contest for infants in our town of Nadudvar - sure enough our six-month-old baby brother won the beauty contest! One rainy day, when Loy had teething pains, my father held him on his lap. He wanted to chew

everything that he could reach and my father wanted to ease his gum pains, so he took out a round watch from his breast pocket and urged Loy to chew it. Suddenly, I said, "father I can do it better". I tried to bite his pocket watch, but instead got a sound slap on my face from my father. It was hard for me to understand why I was not allowed to do something that he offered so generously to my baby brother .

Our parents, my brothers and myself, deeply loved and spoiled this little angelic baby brother! We hung around him every chance. He happily smiled at us, and we enjoyed his short span of life. He tried to make us all happy .

One day in early spring, my mother covered him with a warm blanket and took him for a walk in the courtyard for fresh air. He was coughing slightly. A short time later, I was awakened at around midnight by his strange, heavy breathing. I was not yet four years old at the time. Without thinking, I said: "father don't you hear the strange heavy breathing of Lajos?" I was so frightened without understanding; it was a deep sense, an instinct of the soul of child and the connection of love from one to another. Lajos, my beautiful baby brother, became sick with diphtheria. In no time, my father was up and dressed. Within minutes he came back with Dr. Domokos Layos (or Oskar?). Silent and frightened, I stared at myself for what seemed like forever. I remember the cruel verdict: "it is too late - why are you calling me just now?" And I remember, too, how angry we, the children, became. Judging him wrongly, my brothers and I swore at him; we thought he did not want to help our beloved baby brother Lajos, and vented our anger by calling him some nicknames. He probably understood our reaction and just disregarded our chit-chat. I am sure he was sorry, too, that he could not save Lajos' life.

The next thing I remember uncle Rezso was staying with us. A little later, we children were taken to Aunt Roza's house (this was probably when our beloved baby brother Layos' funeral took place). When we were allowed to come home, our house was very sad, the aftermath of death hanging in the air. There were no smiles on our faces, our little hearts filled with sorrow at the loss of our dear baby brother Lajos.

Both our parents sat low on a mattress placed on the bare floor. It was a very sad show. People came to our house to console us and share with our parents during their inconsolable grief. It left my mother inconsolable in the years to come. It was heart rending to see one's parents in times of

sorrow such as this. This was already the third child that our parents lost, all of them less than one year old. But I remember only this one - when the two others died I was too young a child to remember. What strange memories to recall from my early childhood.

Memories

In Nadudvar I also had quite a number of girl cousins. None of them ever came to visit me, even though some of them were around my age. I myself was too sensitive to befriend them, so I stayed away from them, but one summer Sabbath I remember standing outside of my cousins' fence, peeping through a small hole in their fence. This was a special occasion - my Uncle Adolf from Kal's two daughters visited, so all my girl cousins from my father's side came together dressed in their best. None of them remembered to invite me! They were all dressed in a marine uniform, while I was just wearing a simple dress. I still recall the humiliating feeling standing outside their home. Oh how I longed to be invited to play, to talk, to mix in their company - but they completely disregarded my very existence those years. I just stood there till the tears covered my eyes, then slowly walked away with the shame of the uninvited. I was no more than five years old when this happened.

I recall much freedom through my childhood years, although my parents sometimes took advantage of me. I recall a Wednesday market day - my father bought an enormous watermelon, and told me to carry it home! Myself a skinny five year old girl... I was unable to contradict my father's words, could not say a word. He should have had better judgement than that! Was it a way to get rid of me - or did he attend to some important business? It was a market day, and he had to earn our living. So I took the enormous watermelon and walked with it a long way, hardly keeping it up. It felt very heavy, and my back was sore. Was I glad when I finally got home and got rid of it!

Also in Nadudvar, after my mother and two brothers came back from a visit to Gyor - where her mother and relatives lived - my youngest brother Bela fell very ill, so much so that his life was threatened. After continuous diarrhea, he was left very weak. The doctor came to our house. He performed a blood transfusion from my father to my sick brother Bela. I do not know how much I understood then, but I do remember how sad I was - standing outside at the open porch of the house and worrying .

We now lived in a different house, with green grapevines climbing high up the terrace. In small towns, it was customary on Fridays to carry the uncooked Sabbath stew (consisting of meat, kugles, beans, barley, onion, garlic and spices) to the baker, who placed them in his big earth oven. We picked them up noontime of the Sabbath day. The carrying home sometime gave rise to disagreements between us children, in regard to whose turn it was to bring it home, since the grown-ups were forbidden to carry things on Sabbath, in accord with the Jewish religion .

Since several of our brothers and sisters died in infancy, our parents became very apprehensive about our health and took extra precaution to take good care of us. Some of the homes we lived in had only bare earth floors, so we often caught prolonged colds in the fall-winter or early spring. Mostly I recall myself coughing and coughing till late spring came, so my mother forced me to go with her to the doctor whose name I remember as Dr. Kohn - or Kronhauser. His house was located on the main road of Nadudvar. As we strolled the streets with my mother, I recall how we passed by a big nice store belonging to Mr. Karakas. Close by, at the opposite side of the road, was city hall, then some turn to the right was the kindergarten. I vividly remember how scared I was from those doctors' visits, and how I hated them. I still remember the heavy feeling descending on me, and I had no say in the matter!

I must have been a very wild child at that time, but also very sensitive. Being constantly only in the company of boys probably influenced me. One of our summertime specialties was running after horse-carts, elevating and holding on to the rear of the travelling horse-cart, enjoying a short ride - till the driver of the wagon yelled or whipped us with his lash. It was really a dangerous ride, but lots of fun !

The only thing that scared me was the darkness at night. I am not sure whether or not it had anything to do with our parents' (mainly our mother) bedtime stories. As I recall, I was very clean at an early age. Daytime I took care all my needs by myself - for that matter, I took care of my needs by night too. What I needed help with at night was light. The darkness was one of my worst enemies at that time. I woke up at night begging my parents to turn on the light, because I was afraid to get out of my bed in the darkness and walk to the bathroom, wherever it was located. My parents usually turned on the light or walked me to take care of my needs. There were some occasions when I woke up at night, called my parents but did not get an answer - that really scared me. I later found out

that some nights my parents used to visit our relatives and left us home by ourselves - no babysitters.

School Setback

I often suffered from sore infections on my fingers or feet. My parents had to go to the doctor mostly with me. Once I had such a bad case of blood poisoning in my foot that the doctor told my father he arrived just in time. If he had come an hour later, it would have been too late to save me! My father carried me on his back many times during that winter, until my foot infection healed and I could walk again.

When I turned six, I looked forward to going to school like everyone else that age. I so desired to master reading and writing, my heart and soul yearning to join the ranks of the knowledgeable. But it was not yet meant to be, I was deprived even this small joy. My mother feared very much for me, her skinny child. She consulted Dr. Kronhauser, who advised her to wait another year until I was seven - maybe then I would be stronger.

So I swallowed my anger and shame as I witnessed my childhood dream being shattered into tiny pieces. So hurt and shocked, I could not even try to argue against it, as my delicate soul was too sensitive to put up a fight. Envious of all the six-year-olds who enrolled to first grade, I felt robbed of my rights, as I had all the necessary skills .

I consoled myself on many occasions by trying to learn on my own, then scribbling on a blank page and asking my parents to verify that I had written letters of the alphabet. They agreed to do so in order to pacify my hurt pride, but my brother Sanyi would not let me fool myself. He told me the cold truth that I was only scribbling. Still, I clung to using pencil and paper as a first step to obtaining knowledge.

Uncle Adolph's Merry-go-round

Every summer, my Uncle Adolph would visit us in Nadudvar. He came to see his mother and other relatives, but mainly to take part in the memorial day for his late father whom he revered with awe. He stayed a couple of days with each relative.

Adolph came to our house on a Sunday afternoon, and I was always glad when visitors arrived. After a short while, he asked my mother if he could

take us children to the merry-go-round by the market. My mother bathed my two brothers and dressed them nicely. She said Adolph could take the boys to the merry-go-round, but that I had to take a nap .

Much as I begged, my mother would not let me go. She bathed and dressed me nicely - I still remember the white vest and shorts set. The vest had big white buttons on its lower edge and the shorts had button holes on its upper edge. Then my mother combed my beautiful gold-blond hair and walked me to my room to sleep. With no desire whatsoever, I walked into the room, my mother following my footsteps uneasily. I climbed up on my bed, closed my eyes tightly and lay quietly faking sleep. My mother pulled down the window-shades, leaving the room almost pitch-dark. For a couple of moments, she stood beside my bed watching me. I did not stir, so my mother left the room. Without thinking twice (my bed was just beneath the window) I climbed out the window and ran through the front gate. I stole out of the house without my mother noticing! I just was very sorry about being bare-foot! But my mother put my sandals out of reach as a precaution against an attempted escape. Fast as my young skinny legs would carry me, I ran all the way to the merry-go-round and found my uncle. He took me for a ride on one of the fancy wood horses. What an ignorant child I must have been - but I was so happy and content!

Welcome Sister Yolan, Brother Yuda!

Then fall came. My older brother Sanyi was in elementary school and my younger brother Bela attended Hebrew school. I was already six years old and finished with kindergarten, yet my mother did not allow me to go to first grade because I was too skinny for her! So this was a sad time for me. My dream of obtaining knowledge had to be postponed. Whenever I could, I asked my parents to help me learn to read and write, and they were happy to oblige.

I spent quite a bit of time around my mother these days. I noticed that my mother washed some baby clothes together with our regular laundry, and asked her if she could give me some of these clothes for the toy baby I made myself. She said she could not. My mom looked somewhat heavy, so I asked her if this meant she may have a little baby - she answered yes! I dared not use the word "pregnant", as my mom would have reproved me for using this word.

I played one afternoon with my self-made rag-doll, and saw my cousin Katalin at our gate about to enter the house for a short visit. Being a very shamefaced girl, I was afraid she would laugh at me when she saw me playing with the rag-doll. I quickly sped off with the doll and hid behind the "restroom" at the other side of the house, staying there for a long time until I was sure my cousin had left.

We were now four children - my two brothers, my younger sister named Yolan, and myself - with the fifth child soon to be born. One sunny afternoon, an unknown lady with a handbag came to our house. We bombarded her with questions about the bag's contents - is there a little baby inside the bag for us? "No", she said, the stork would bring us the baby. While we had no idea how a baby comes to this world, the idea of a big bird bringing the baby sounded far-fetched. No doubt, my mother was resting in bed with great pains all the while, but she suffered quietly without saying a word. I never heard my mom complain, not then, and not even during the catastrophic Holocaust period. With her fine character, she gracefully bore whatever suffering Providence brought her way.

A little later my mom sent me to fetch my father. He was busy playing cards with a few of his friends in a coffeehouse owned by the Gold family, near Nadudvar's central market. I was really hurt when he did not come home right away. With his wife asking him to be by her side when she gives birth, he should have come home immediately. He sent me home with the message that he would be back in time, and indeed he was. He took all us children to Aunt Roza's house, where we slept very little that night. I recall jumping joyfully on the beds with our cousins the Elfenbein boys.

The following morning, we came home to find our mother in bed with a nice little baby boy in the crib. My mother stayed in bed for a couple of days, with nurse coming every day to take care of her. My father went to his business early in the morning and my two brothers were at school, leaving me to carry water from the street to our house for the nurse to use. I peeped through the keyhole to see what the nurse did to my mom.

When our newborn baby brother became eight days old he was circumcised by a mohel named Blau (or maybe Lefkovits) who also slaughtered animals for the Jewish community and served as cantor at the Temple. In accord with Jewish law, only a well trained man is allowed

to slaughter animals - with his experienced hands and knowledge, the animal suffers minimally.

A big celebration marked the circumcision of our baby brother, who received the name Yuda Andor (Laslo). The event took place on the holiday of sukkot, so we had a really joyous celebration in our sukkah and courtyard, filled with people who came to share in our gladness. I still remember how glad I felt that day with so many guests, especially the little boys surrounding me with their flattering comments.

PUSPOKLADANY (DECEMBER 1933)

The Railway Station

Nadudvar is a small town with about ten thousand residents. In running his business, my father experienced much aggravation and was overwhelmed by the competition. For that reason, we moved to a bigger town nearby, Puspokladany. It was a very cold Sunday in December, with the wind blowing sharply outside. Our household belongings were packed on a horse-wagon early in the morning, my father sat beside the driver and they left on their way. Later in the day our mother carried baby Yuda in her arms and the four of us bigger children followed her to Aunt Roza's house, where we had a warm lunch. Dear Aunt Roza escorted us to the train station and traveled with us to Kaba, the first town on our way to Puspokladany. There we changed trains. Aunt Roza helped us inside the train, making sure each of us sat comfortably. With a heavy heart, she wished us the best in our new place.

We reached our destination - Puspokladany - at about three p.m. December 1933. My mother with a baby in her arms, followed by four small children aged two, five, six and eight.

We entered the waiting area of the railway station. It was full of unknown people smoking cigarettes which clouded the room. Here we waited for my father to take us home to our new place in a strange city. My witty brother Sanyi was always finding someone to tease - now it was my turn to be his victim. The railway station was full of advertisements and pictures, one of them depicting a scene from Budapest. Sanyi scared me by declaring that we had not arrived at Puspokladany, but at Budapest. We got off the train at the wrong place! He knew exactly whom to tease. I really believed him and was frightened. My mother's words reassured me only slightly, but just then my father appeared as the door opened.

Welcome Home

As always, my father's beaming face reassured me. A deep inner gleefulness took me over and I was sure we had arrived at the right destination. In a heavy, horse-drawn carriage, we went from the train-station through the long main street, Rakosisi-ut, passing by the central market and its monument commemorating the town's soldiers who died in World War One. Then we turned left to Bockai-ut and after a short while

made a right turn to [Damjanich?] or Dembinsky street, then took a left turn to [Arany] Yanos street number sixteen. Alas we arrived at our first rented house - complete with big courtyard - in Puspokladany.

We hardly had time to look around before my father rushed to bring a doctor to check our baby brother Yuda. Dr. Oscar Szucs came at once. As he checked our baby brother's lower body, Yuda let out a long stream of pee on him. All us children tried to hold back our laughter. Dr. Szucs was a very handsome man and a very devoted, good human being. Faithfully and diligently he responded to his patients' requests. Without delay he came whenever his service was called for - rain, snow, storm, sunshine - to the rich and to the poor. He always came with a kind, beaming smile. But alas within eleven years he, too, would be among the victims cruelly driven to the gas chambers of Auschwitz, his dead body departing through the crematorium chimneys in the form of smoke, blending with the dark clouds in the sky.

Some of our new neighbors welcomed us very nicely, while others were less friendly. The Gyore family which lived opposite us were quite nice. They were also a big family, and one of the girls befriended me. She invited me to go with her to kindergarten, and for a while I enjoyed going with her. Then one day as all the children sat on the low chairs the boy sitting next to me kicked my legs. I protested to the teacher right away, but she ignored my complaint and sent me back to my chair. Even as a six-and-a-half year old child I felt the great injustice and humiliation. The boy kicked me because I was a Jew, and the teacher disregarded my complaint because I was a Jew. Never again did I go to this or any other kindergarten.

Jew, Run to Palestine!

One day as I walked on our street some other children walked by - one of them yelled at me: "[sialady zsidu Palestinaba]" or, in English, "Jew, run to Palestine"! Deeply hurt, unwillingly recognizing the sad truth behind the degrading words directed at me, I decided right then and there that I did not wish to live in a land where I was so unwanted. I did not know much about Palestine, but as soon as I saw my father I begged him to move there - I do not want to stay in a land that shames me because I am a Jew. My father answered that there is a Pogrom going on in Palestine, but that after the war we would move there. But I continued to heatedly insist that we leave this land.

I soon told him that we should move to America, which has many different nations and religions. Even if someone teases me there I would not mind, because everyone in America has an immigrant background and I could humiliate them back. My father just said no stubbornly.

Then I inquired about England. Did the people there also hate us, or are they more tolerant toward the Jewish religion. Without waiting for his answer I begged him to leave Hungary. My father, much as he loved, became speechless and had no answer for me. Many years later, I realized that the angels put those words in my mouth as a forewarning suggesting that we try to escape the great catastrophe looming over our heads in Europe.

Making Friends

We had no relatives here. I had finished kindergarten but was not yet in school. With no other Jewish children living nearby I had little choice but to play with gentile friends. Sometimes I went over to the Gyore family and played with the girl my age. We would roam through their big yard, just marveling at the snow-covered trees that looked so mysteriously beautiful, or we would take a sled ride.

An elderly Jewish couple with grown-up children lived near us. They sold newspapers and humorous magazines for children - ["Ludas Matye"]. I quite enjoyed browsing through them, and they let my brothers and I look through the magazines. They encouraged us to come every day, so I would run over there whenever my parents allowed it, gladly paging through the colorful pages and enjoying every picture and letter.

But those happy days were short lived. Once, as I enjoyed looking through the magazines, the old lady took a nap, and her husband sat close by me. I suddenly felt rather uncomfortable - actually disgusted - when the old man petted my bottom. As a six-and-a-half year old child, I must have been too fainthearted to say, "hands off you dirty old man"! I just walked out of the house, and never again set my foot in the house. Whenever I saw him in the street, I would cross to the other side and run far away as fast as I could. I hated him, and could not face him.

Chickens and a Garden

Soon spring came, and we took full advantage of our big courtyard as we played outside. My father bought me a new red dress - a color which I did not like - so I shortened it and dressed my little sister Yolanda in it. As soon as she entered the courtyard our rooster jumped on her. She screamed so loud that even the rooster left her alone. We had some chickens, and it was amazing to see how baby chicks would walk out of the cracking eggshells which they laid. It was like a toy for us, and whenever we touched those small chicks the mother hen would give us an angry look.

We only lived a short time and Arany-Yanos sixteen. The house we rented had an orchard and vegetable garden which the owner cultivated. It was surrounded by a high wooden fence which we mischievously climbed over, roamed about the garden and damaged the produce. The owner was quite angry and showed us the way out.

Soon enough my father found another house to rent on the same street, at number sixty-three. Here we have more Jewish neighbors close by and the gentile neighbors were also friendlier. I had quite a few friends here, but also had an anti-semitic boy about my age who teased me because of I was Jewish. I teased him back - the outcome was that we had some fights!

School Setback: Part II

I turned seven and when September came I was finally registered to school. How I happily walked to school every day. I was very excited to be in school at last, and turned into an excellent, highly motivated student. I won all the contests and took prizes for being the best student. We had lots of fun on rainy days, taking off our shoes and socks, holding them in our hands and walking in ditches full of water! And when winter came and the water in the ditches froze, we would ice skate. Freely! Joyfully! But our cherished freedom and happiness were short lived.

One spring day, with less than three months left in the school year, I told my parents that my back hurts. I had to stay home and go to the doctor, but I refused to go, so my father brought Dr. Szucs home to examine me. I ran away to one of our gentile neighbors, the [Darocis], about four houses down the street. When the doctor arrived, my father forced me

home. I was very angry with my parents and with Dr. Szucs. He hardly examined me since I tried to run away from him. At my parents' request Dr. Oskar Szucs wrote a few lines to the school principal asking him to free me from attending school until next September. I was so angry that I did not even want to say goodbye to my teacher and schoolmates. Looking back, I feel it was very cruel of the principal not to have certified my completion of first grade. We had already learned all the material and I was an excellent student! At the age of eight I would have to be a first-grade pupil again. I was so embarrassed - the thought of sitting bored and listening to lessons I already knew by heart.

Fatherly Inventiveness

Those six months till September I spent mostly in the company of my father, including lots of time outside in the fresh air. My father's occupation necessitated taking long walks in the early morning hours, when the gentile residents were ready to sell their wares - duck or geese fashions, animal skins or lamb or goat wool.

After finishing his daily rounds he went home to work on his wares. Sometimes he also worked on his invention, a machine that separated the down from the feathers. It was composed of a huge wooden box and steel parts. He had different tradesmen prepare the various steel parts, so that nobody would steal his patent. He sold quite a few, but at a very low price. Each time it turned out better. He worked devotedly on this project, which was hand operated - its big wheel had to be turned constantly. But my father took into account operation via electricity. He never fulfilled that dream, though, as the Nazi era mercilessly cut short his dream, his life.

My father and fellow tradesmen would sometimes gather at the house of a larger tradesman who would buy their wares. The larger tradesman would "buy them off" - entertaining them by playing cards - and pay them very low prices. Those small tradesmen worked very hard roaming the town door-to-door in rain, snow and all kinds of weather to earn their daily living. This was a common occupation at the time. My father also went to neighboring towns by bicycle or train and would trade wares with his fellow tradesmen.

I often accompanied my father. Most of the gentiles we went to had big fenced courtyards around their houses. They earned their livelihood from livestock - cows, pigs, ducks, geese and chickens - field crops such as

wheat and corn, and orchards. Some of their produce they would eat, the rest they would sell. We Jews had no rights to own land, so we had to look for other ways to earn our living .

Most of our gentile neighbors also had nice flower gardens. So when my father went to their houses, I asked for flowers. Most of them would give me, but others told me that flowers had to be in the flower garden. My begging made my father uncomfortable and he would later reprimand me. Even though I hated to be reprimanded, I could not control myself and was overcome with delight whenever I saw flowers. I simply could not control my feelings.

The World Around Me

The world around me always touched me deeply, and I gave much thought to solving the challenges I encountered. When I was hardly seven years old, I took a stroll one Sabbath afternoon with my father on the main street and suddenly asked him, "where is the Almighty, and why don't we see him"? My father answered that I should not ask about things which are hidden from the eye. "Nobody saw the Almighty except for Moses - do not question it".

On another occasion I asked my father why the Almighty created some people rich and others poor. Why doesn't everybody enjoy a nice income? My father told me that this is to test the rich people, to see if they give money to the poor like they should.

Why Can't We Be Friends

My father spent most of his time working outside the home. My mother and us children felt very happy when he occasionally managed to work at home. There was something special about him, a kindness which radiated from his soul and deeply touched us, filling us with a special glee. Even our neighbors liked to visit us when my father was around and enjoy his company! At home, my father often took breaks from work to nap a little, or read newspapers, some borrowed books or the Bible.

Thanks to his kind personality, everybody liked him, even the gentiles, who preferred to do business with him. A certain Mrs. [Be-kish] used to say, "Mr. Bleier - we all need each other - the Jews need the gentiles and the gentiles need the Jews". She was one of the few intelligent people

who deplored anti-semitism. Her family lived on Arany Yanos street by the Er River, near the edge of town .

I can recall several kind gentile families who we knew as neighbors or as business acquaintances. We had mutual trust and reverence with the Bede family who resided on Kurucz street (no. 10?). The Szasz family were our next-door neighbors for a couple of years. They were most kind, and our friendship continued long after they were no longer our neighbors. Mr. Szasz would open his heart and purse and lend my father as much cash as my father asked for and he could afford. And he didn't take any interest. What kind souls he and his wife were. May the Almighty bless their memory!

Look Out for the River Er

Those six months out of school I'd mostly play with the gentile girls in the neighborhood, hang out with my brothers or stroll with my father. On a nice summer day in July or August, when school was out, my older brother Sanyi (Yitzchak in Hebrew) came home to our courtyard with two of his friends. They took off their outer clothes and hid them in the storage room near the gate. One of Sanyi's friends gave me a sharp look and demanded that I dare not tell anybody that they are going to swim in the Er River. I looked at the three of them but did not say a word, keeping my worries to myself. "What if God forbid they drown in the River Er"!

Those two friends of my brother Sanyi were also called Yitzchak in Hebrew. One of them radiated a special, humble kindness that touched me deeply and made me feel a heart-to-heart connection. That effect followed me for years to come, and I carried it deep within my soul .

As soon as the three boys left, I began to worry, shaking outside the gate and praying that the Almighty return them safely. No less so, I prayed that my father would arrive home quickly and take care of their safety. It did not take long before my father was standing before me. With great excitement I told him about my big worry. Somehow, I always considered my father the "almighty rescuer". An innocent child, I thought my father would always be there to solve our problems.

Just then, the three boys arrived. My father warned them about the dangers of swimming in the Er River, and also told the other boys'

parents. They never came to our house again, something which made me feel very guilty.

From early childhood, I feared not only the Almighty, but also fire and water. One of the stories my mother told me left a deep impression on me. Her brother Bandi - may his memory be blessed - drowned in the Raba River at Gyor when he was eight years old." Friends" apparently pushed him into the river because he refused to take off his cap at a Christian gathering.

Father's Stories

We children always liked listening to our parents' stories, with mother usually fulfilling our "demands". I also managed to "pull" a few small stories out of my father, with these leaving a long-lasting influence on me.

One of the stories I nudged out of him relates to a pious Jew who was walking by the mansion of a gentile "lord". The gentile stopped him and asked him where he was going. The Jews simple answer, "I don't know", angered the gentile, who ordered his servants to put the Jew in prison. After a while, the gentile's anger subsided, and he ordered the Jew be brought before him. "Why did you give me that answer", he asked the Jew. "I intended to go to the house of prayer," answered the Jew, "and I wound up being thrown in prison instead - one never knows where he is going." The answer placated the gentile lord, who set the pious Jew free.

My father's second story tells about the souls that belong to each other, or rather, marriages written from above even before we are born. The Almighty set an order as to who should marry whom. Sometimes, my father added, one of the two betrothed souls enters the body of a non-Jew. In such cases, they may not marry each other, but must wait to be born again into new bodies. Then, as Jews, they should marry, as they truly belong to each other. This story left me with strange feelings and thoughts for years to come.

The third story I remember talks about a king and his three daughters. One day, the king asked his daughters how much they loved him. The oldest daughter likened her love to something she loved very much, candy. The second daughter liked chocolate more than anything else, so she likened her love to chocolate. The youngest daughter thought about what was most important thing in food, so she likened her love to salt.

This humiliating comparison infuriated her father the king, who ordered her out of the palace .He did not even give her a chance to defend herself. As time passed, her suffering intensified. In desperation, she asked her father's friends to help her. One day, they put candy in the king's soup instead of salt; the next day, they put chocolate. The trick worked, with the king realizing how important salt is in his daily life and understanding how much his youngest daughter loved him. He ordered her back in the palace and admired her more than her sisters.

My father also told me that our forefathers were Jews from Russia who escaped Russian tyranny against the Jewish faith about four generations back and settled in Hungary.

One more little saying from my father: an imperfect human body has inside it a bad soul.

Close by our dwelling place ran a small riverbed, where during the summer ducks, ducklings and geese swam playfully all day long. I liked to sit by the river edge, put my legs inside the river and enjoy myself by watching nature, meditating and weaving my far-reaching dreams that I never ran out of.

School, Alas!

At last September came and I was able to attend school for good. I attended first grade together with my brother Bela, who was one-and-a-half years younger than me, as were most of the pupils. No question - I was one of the outstanding students.

It did not take long for me to befriend my classmates. Early one Saturday morning, a classmate visited. Her name was Edith. Since then, we took every opportunity to be in each other's company, enjoying endless hours together. She also introduced me to a younger friend who I very much adored and later got even closer to.

During those short, fleeting years, I visited and played with each of my classmates at least once. To remember them forever - many of them perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz! Those memories bring tears to my eyes even after so many years, because they continue to live deep within me. They took part of my feelings with them - their memories always will be a part of me.

Today's children have so many toys, television, parks and museums to go to. And still, they always look for more to fill their pleasures. It sometimes seems that nothing is good enough to satisfy them. But very few of us had any toys - maybe a doll, a ball or a few little toy dishes. When we played together, we would invent new ways to entertain ourselves.

One of our favorite games was "yes or no". Someone would ask questions, and only no or yes could be used for an answer. Or, two children would think of something and the others would have to guess what it is. Or, we would put on a play - some of us would act, sing and dance, while the others were the audience. We never got bored. We had some deep, soul-to-soul friendships between us and always enjoyed being together.

Vera

I most enjoyed spending my free time (which I had plenty of in those years) with Vera, and sometimes with her brother George. He sometimes played with just the two of us, but mostly, he took part in our plays when other friends were with us too. Oh, Vera, how close our friendship became - soul-to-soul - like David and Jonathan in our holy writings.

Vera's family had a big house with a big courtyard, a small flower garden with lilac trees around both sides, and a [mora-bora] fruit tree on the right of the flower garden. This fruit is some kind of wild cherry-like fruit. We would roam in the big yard playing hide-and-seek or tag; the happy memories of those childhood years turned into sad memories for today.

Despite the age difference between Vera and myself, we understood each other perfectly those four short years, and complemented each other. People often teased me because of it, but I paid no attention, even when my teacher spoke to me about it during school. I thought it was none of his business. Later I found out that he wanted me to be friends with his own daughter two years my junior, whom I did befriend later. His daughter Katy very much liked to spend her time in my company, so much so that even on a day like Yom Kippur eve she visited. I also really liked to play with her, but - because she was the teacher's daughter - could not overcome a strange feeling which separated me from her.

Honor Thy Father

We loved and revered our parents. They educated us by explaining things - what was forbidden and why. It was a privilege to obey them. The way they taught us about the laws of our religion and moral behavior deeply touched us. Out of deep love, we tried to follow the path our parents showed us.

My father taught me his business at an early age, so I could go alone to buy feathers or animal skins. He was usually satisfied with my purchases. Also, when he sent a gentile driver to take merchandise on a horse-cart to a different town, either I or one of my brothers would go along to receive the money.

Late one summer evening, my two brothers failed to come home. When my father went to their teacher, the rabbi, to inquire about them, he was shocked to hear that they were not in the cheder that afternoon. We were all very worried about them. My father asked around, and one of their friends told him that they went to visit relatives in the nearby town of Nadudvar. Nadudvar was fourteen kilometers away, and it took two hours to get there by foot. My father rode his bicycle in the dark of the night and found them at my grandmother's house in Nadudvar. That same night, he returned with them, arriving home at about midnight. We all slept when they arrived home.

Let's Go to Nadudvar!

I don't know if there was any spanking. What I do know is that some time later when I did the same sin I was very much spanked. One nice summer morning, I sat beside the well, dreaming, enjoying the sunshine, the beautiful sky and the stork atop our chimney. Just then, my younger brother Bela approached me on his way to the Talmud Torah School (it was summer vacation and the regular school was not in session). "Irene", he said, "would you like to walk with me to Nadudvar"? The proposal delighted me and I answered with a happy yes. I probably had not yet eaten my breakfast, but breakfast was not much of a concern for me those days. We were both less than ten years old, and all I cared about was making sure he knew the way to get there. So we went our mischievous way, luckily meeting nobody who knew us in the streets.

As we reached the outskirts of Puspokladany, we passed by a sign which said "Nadudvar - 14 kilometers". We passed by the railroad station, then the Catholic cemetery to the right, its gate and fencing surrounded by tall trees. There were a few houses and some orchards on our left, and trees on either side of the scarcely paved dirt road .

We had already walked several kilometers when a gentile man with a horse-cart stopped beside us and heartily offered us a ride. We had a real adventure. We were fearless, clever, mischievous children. Our host asked us where we were going, and we told him that we were on our way to Nadudvar to visit our grandmother. He then asked us if we had parents, and if they allowed us - two very young children - to walk alone from Puspokladany to Nadudvar. After we innocently lied to him, he asked us many more questions, which I do not presently recall. He was an honest, decent man. We enjoyed the ride and his company. We reached an "intersection" where the road to the left led to the town of [Yharcaz], and the road to the right led to Nadudvar. Here, he most humbly told us our ride had ended, not before he gave us directions and told us to take care of ourselves. We thanked him for his kindness and got off.

We enjoyed walking the rest of the way, and by 10:00 a.m. we stood before our grandmother in Nadudvar. She asked us if our parents knew about our visit - we hastily reassured her that they did. Actually, they had probably found out by about this time, or shortly thereafter, as my brother Sanyi told them that my younger brother was missing. In retrospect, I feel bad about lying to the horse-cart driver and to my grandmother. But if we would have told the driver the truth, he would have tried to force us home . As for our grandmother, she probably knew the truth, but we wanted to avoid her reprimand. We were driven by fear and pride.

It was a Wednesday, a market day for Nadudvar. My grandmother was busy dealing with customers at her house-paint store. We had to wait until she closed the store for the day. Closing time - we walked with our grandmother to her home. She lived with her daughter Lora, Lora's husband, and their little boy, Tomy. We washed up and sat down with our relatives for dinner. Till today, I remember how good it tasted; green beans with sour cream, then cheesecake.

After dinner, everyone took a nap - everyone except for my brother and I, that is. We had to sit quietly and wait for them in porch, where the

grapevines' green leaves provided cool shade on the hot summer day. We picked some grapes - they tasted very good.

At last, grandma, Aunt Lora and Cousin Tomy came out all dressed up. We walked about half an hour to Aunt Rosa's house, with its big, grassy courtyard quite familiar to us. Aunt Rosa served refreshments, but I asked to be excused and went out to the big courtyard, where I searched for four-leaf clovers. Some of my friends told me that if you put them in your socks, they bring you luck.

A Hasty Summer Vacation

I searched and searched, and found a few. Suddenly my heart jumped with glee as I looked up and saw my beloved father. I ran up to him and offered him a four-leaf clover to put in his socks for good luck. I wish for him to always be lucky! So they found out about our adventure very quickly at home.

My father soon told us that he is taking us both home right away on his bike. I asked my father and Aunt Rosa if I could stay one week with her. They said I could, and my father left with my brother Bela. I stayed at Aunt Rosa's house, but visited all my other relatives too. It turned out to be a very nice summer vacation. Playing with all my cousins, each invited me to dinner a different day of the week. I really enjoyed it. Some of my friends visited their relatives all summer, so why couldn't I spend at least one short week with mine.

Then Wednesday morning came. My grandma arranged a ride home for me with a horse cart. Some people I knew took me home from the market place. But before I left I went to say hello to some very dear friends of my parents - the Klein [Bencri] family. Mrs. Klein presented me with nice small basket full of sweet, tiny apples. One of my cousins also gave me a present, a jump rope.

Not So Welcome Home

As I sat atop the horse cart and parted from all my relatives, I could hardly wait to get home. The merchandise-laden cart traveled too slow for my taste, but I had no choice but to wait. My heart beat with joy as I opened the front gate in the mid-afternoon and saw my younger sister Jolan. I gave her all the presents I received, including the jump rope. My mother

came and welcomed me. But not with the welcome that I had hoped for - I had my fathers' permission to stay there for the week!

I went over to the Farkas family, where I hoped to find my father - and did. He just gave me some money and told me to buy some goodies. I stood beside him for a few moments, then bought myself an ice cream. Afterwards I went to play with my friend Vera and, as always, we had a good time. I stayed at her house until late in the evening. When I came home, I asked my brother Bela if he got punished for walking to Nadudvar the week before. He said no. So only I was punished - why? I wondered, but dared not ask my mom.

Our Gentile Neighbors

In the Fall, one of our gentile neighbors invited us - along with all the other neighbors - to his house to attend his daughter's wedding. I asked my parents if could go to the [Pandur] family for the wedding. "You may go," they said, "but don't eat any of the food there." Everyone looked at the beautiful bride. Among all the guests, I recall one other Jewish friend, and our landlord's son, may he rest in peace. When Mrs. Pandur went around with the mouth-watering yellow cake and offered me a piece I graciously turned her down. But a few moments later I could not overcome my desire to taste the cake, and took a small piece. Shortly thereafter, I went home.

And now, a different episode. We played with some of the gentile children in our neighborhood, who were quite nice. But others acted in a hostile manner towards us. They would throw stones at us, pick fights with us, and call us humiliating words because we were Jewish. I could not stand this - I wanted to be a proud Jew. I wanted to look strong even if I was only a small girl. These enemies often faced me when I walked alone in the street. I did not fear their words, at least I did not want them to think I feared them. If there were only one of them, I would fight back; if there were more, I would try to run away or choose a different street.

One summer day I was walking home with a silver five pengo coin in my hand. Suddenly, a bunch of my enemies appeared all at once. If I run away, they will ridicule me - they will follow me and beat me up. I had little time to think. So I decided to overcome my fear and paraded before them with my head up high. Nobody said a word. They stood there paralyzed by fear, or by wonder. My own heart beat quickly from fear. Some

heavenly force must have taken hold of my enemies, and of me, giving my legs strength to move on. Perhaps my own fear hypnotized them. Did they feel the same fear that I did? I thought about this encounter many times since then. Sometimes I think Elijah the Prophet came to my rescue.

New Home, New Enemy

Before I turned ten we moved again. Our landlord sold our residence to Mr. [Panti], whose family renovated the house and opened a [smithery]. My father gave him business occasionally. They were kind gentiles who became Seventh Day Adventists. This was a new religion where gentiles celebrated the Jewish Sabbath instead of Sunday. A next-door neighbor of ours, Mrs. [Srasz], also took up this new religion. But her husband did not. He was so angered that he never again spoke to his wife. Both of them more than sixty years old, they continued to live together in the same house, staying faithful and devoted to each other for the next twenty-five years until Mr. Srasz passed away. They had three daughters and lived as a close-knit family. Marriage was sacred to them - nothing could break it up except for death.

Our new abode on [Bern-Tabornok] Street was also near a well where water flowed continuously from four pipes. I do not know why, but it was called the well of the "Roses". Our new place, with a very small courtyard, was closer to the Er River, and to the Synagogue/Jewish School. We had some nice new neighbors who did business with us.

As usual, though, I also found an "enemy" here, on the corner opposite our house, a child of the [Szabor] family. There was an unrelated Szabor family at the other corner, a childless, friendly couple. The "enemy" Szabors were quite poor and had about three children. An older son of theirs once threw stones at my brother Sanyi, and my father complained to this boy's parents. This boy never bothered any of us again. But they had a younger boy about my age, with a short, thin body and an ugly face. Walking home one day, this "cockroach" (he does not deserve a better nickname) called me a "stinky Jew", and I yelled back at him, "stinky parasite". He threw a rock at me, and I responded in kind. Over the years, we would engage in fistfights. He would pull my beautiful blond hair, and I would scratch his face with my fingernails as hard as possible. When he hurt enough he would let go, and we both ran home in opposite directions. There was no point in my complaining to my parents about

this, as they would not go to the boy's parents to protest. I had to learn at an early age how to defend myself and not depend on others.

Quite a few years later, I encountered this "cockroach" again. The cursed Amalekites - the German SS soldiers - had occupied the town of Puspokladany, and I saw him walking on the main street, now a short and ugly sixteen-year old. Swallowing all my fear and holding my head up high, I marched in front of him and an SS soldier who was with him. The little beast pointed his finger at me, hoping that the Nazi would harm me, and cried out "Juda, Juda" - Jew, Jew. The soldier just looked at him and ignored his plea, and I thanked the Almighty that I passed them peacefully.

Dreams of a Future in Education

The years passed by quickly. I was a good pupil with a promising future, looking forward to four years at the [polgari] school in our town after finishing four years of elementary school, and then on to Gyor, where I would live with my relatives and study to be a teacher.

A future in education seemed like the perfect plan for me, but I secretly dreamed of being a writer. My teachers always expressed amazement at my excellent writing skills. I can recall two stories I wrote in school. In second grade, we had to write about what we wanted to be when we grew up. I wrote that I wanted to be a teacher, so that I need not worry about earning a living. My teacher commended my writing skills, but pointed out that everyone has their worries. Her words made me feel uncomfortable. I had meant to say that teachers receive a nice, steady income from the government every month - not like other people who have to look for their income every day and work very hard for it. And some days they earn nothing for their family needs. In third grade we had to write a short story about snow. I don't remember what I wrote, but recall that my teacher found it excellent.

A very devoted student, I would always be the first in the classroom. I was so excited to go to school that I could not eat breakfast! My mother would run after me with a glass of milk which I would usually just take a few licks of. But I did take tasty sandwiches which I ate heartily at school.

As the years passed by, we Jews closed our eyes and pushed away the thoughts about the bitter fate which loomed over us. We were unwanted,

unwelcome and barely tolerated. Here and there the Hungarian government passed another law restricting our income or higher education. But none of us wanted to recognize what was coming. Generations of persecution stiffened our necks and we got used to the flaming hatred that surrounded us. It was like an unseen sword stabbing us.

My Aunt Etelka came to live in Puspokladany, together with her husband - sick with tuberculosis - and their only son Gyula. By some chance they rented a small apartment next to one of my enemies, so we became friends with former foes.

To augment their meager living, Etelka and her husband took in some homeless Jewish children, with the government paying for their upkeep. While living in a one-room apartment, they once housed a very nice looking little boy about four years old. I visited them with my father, and suddenly saw something which shocked me to tears - myself an eleven-year-old girl at the time. The little boy climbed out from beneath a bed, where he took his afternoon nap in a wooden bathtub. But they forced this poor child - whom they nicknamed Muky - back into the bathtub and pushed him beneath the bed. This inhuman treatment left me speechless, and I did not know what I could do to help. I felt a very deep pain which hurt me all the more so because it was my own relatives who acted this way.

First Love

One bright sunny day during summer vacation - a day during which one should be happy just to be alive and enjoy it - I was bored and looking for something to do with my free time. Which one of my friends should I visit? Just then, my brother Sanyi asked me to walk with him to his friend John Yitzchak. I agreed, not realizing that a lifetime influence was ahead of me.

They lived close by, and we arrived after a ten-minute walk. Another friend was already there, and we barely said hello before he invited us all over to his house to play. John Yitzchak asked his mother's permission. His mother, a tall, heavy woman, sat on a chair. She agreed, and instructed him to behave take care of himself. John Yitzchak faced his mother [Zichala], listened to her with awe and reverence - his eyes gleaming with love, his face beaming with kindness. "Yes mother", he answered. Never before had I seen a child act with such kindness and

devotion to his parent. I, too, revered my parents and loved them deeply, but this boy's kind soul left me totally speechless and rooted to the floor. I fell in love with him that very day!

The friend's house was two long streets away. From the first street, Bockskay Street, we were to take a right turn to Rakoczi Street. Walking with the three boys, the sense of amazement at this boy's behavior continued to occupy my thoughts. I began to scrutinize his face, an earnest brownish-red, kind, good-looking face. Then I continued to scrutinize him. He had a slim build, so I thought not only does he have a kind soul, but he is also a good-looking, slim boy. That appealed to me very much. I fell in love with him then and there on Bockskay Street, as we passed the city's fire station. My first childhood love at the age of eleven!

I was almost in a dream, feeling wonderful love toward this newfound "object". Suddenly, the other friend, D. Y., looked at me and asked why they needed a girl to come play with them. I was so embarrassed that I wanted the earth to open its mouth and swallow me. A moment of grave silence followed, with nobody saying a word. Then my newly discovered love said, "oh yes, she is coming with us". D. Y. looked like he had just come out of an ice-cold shower. The four of us continued on our way, but this incident left its sour effect on me. I could not overcome this sense of shame whenever I saw D. Y., or even heard his name. Whenever my brother Sanyi asked me to visit John Yitzchak with him I did so gladly, but only if he promised that D. Y. would not be there too. Years later, when this childhood dream of love was about to bloom, this friend's behavior put an end to our beautiful relationship.

Ever since that day, I began to weave my dreams around him. One day I even asked Sanyi how old John Yitzchak was. When he told me that he was only one year older than me I became very disappointed - with my childish thoughts I figured out that a man should be at least two years older than the woman he marries. But then I asked my parents how old they were and figured out there was only a one-year difference. I found my parents' marriage ideal, so that gave me hope for the future.

Now the only question was if he would also choose me when we came of age. With my dreamy, childish thinking, I solved that problem too. I thought about all the Jewish girls around that age, and came to the conclusion that no one else's social standing would befit him. He would

have no choice but to marry me! That gave me the full right to dream and hope, so my feeling of deep love towards him just grew.

Sometime in the muddy Puspokladany winter, before he finished sixth grade, John Yitzchak's beloved mother passed away. I went to her funeral with my mother, and also to console the family a few days later. I can still remember his sad, earnest face. I very much shared his pain, but was too shy to even exchange a few words with him.

He returned to school after the week of mourning passed, still very sad, and assumed the rear bench at the right side of our classroom. When our very strict teacher called his name, I turned back and looked at them. Luckily, our teacher did not see me, as I sat at the front bench at the right side of the room. I was very concerned that our teacher might not speak nicely to John Yitzchak, and turned back only when I was satisfied with my teacher's humane behavior towards my chosen secret friend. It may sound strange, but our teacher had a tough personality. This arrogant creature enjoyed mocking and hitting his pupils, so I had to check his behavior.

When he turned twelve and finished sixth grade, John Yitzchak left Puspokladany to learn a trade by apprenticeship.

Mr. Buydoso, Righteous Gentile

One year, I do not recall exactly when, the Jewish community was baking matzot for Passover in the synagogue building when a fire broke out and the temple went up in flames. All of the Torah scrolls were saved thanks to the heroic deeds of one of our Catholic neighbors, Mr. Buydoso. He fearlessly rushed through the flames of the blazing fire and helped save our Torah scrolls to the last.

At the time, Mr. Buydoso was a widower with two beautiful teenage daughters who studied and lived in a Catholic nunnery. He was a kind soul who carried a giant body and worked as a high-ranking official at city hall. People loved him. Not long after this incident, he took a train to a nearby town, where he was to get married. Somehow, he missed the destination - he pulled the cord signaling the engineer to stop, but to no avail. Desperate not to be late to his own wedding, Mr. Buydoso threw out his two heavy suitcases and jumped off the speeding train. It was a most

unfortunate jump which resulted in his death. His tragic passing was a great loss to all of us.

Summer Entertainment

The years went by rapidly. During summer vacations I would play mostly at Vera's house, and sometimes with other friends of mine. Occasionally I would visit girls from out of town at their hosts' house. These would always welcome me (except for one occasion - about that a bit later).

Once, I joined some girls to visit Vera Rosenbaum, a guest from Debrecen of the Herskowitz family. One of the girls' family owned Puspokladany's only theater hall, and we decided to present a play of our own. I wrote one of the verses. Each of us recruited friends who were willing to pay to see us perform, and a small audience turned up to watch our play - on stage at a real theater! When we divided our income, we each had about enough to buy an ice-cream cone.

Some time later, I organized a performance together with one friend, Alice Weis. A capacity crowd of friends and some grown-up neighbors filled our small courtyard. Of those who attended, I most remember Mrs. Karoby, who always treated us kindly. Everybody enjoyed the performance, and both us "actors" received our fair share.

Now about the rude reception I once received during summer vacation. I made friends with a fine, attractive girl visiting from Hajdunanas. Together with some other girl friends we set a time to visit her one afternoon, but she asked me to also visit her in the morning. As her relatives owned a grocery store, I had to overcome my bashfulness and go there first to ask if I could see her. The proud old lady who tended the store scrutinized me thoroughly, her eyes staring disgustedly at a wound I had on my leg. Then she told me my friend is not home. I felt ashamed and insulted. My pride hurt very much because I knew the old lady lied to me.

Premonition at the Prom

In September, this family hosted another relative of theirs, a nice boy named Nick. We studied together in the same class and he soon became a good friend of mine. We chatted during recess and very much enjoyed each other's company.

The school held an impressive party each year to mark the end of the school year, with parents and guests attending. While we were happy that this was the last day of school, the pressure of the final examinations - covering all that we learned during the course of the year - aggravated us. We were very excited, with this year extra special for me. As I stood near the entrance with Katy, our teacher's daughter, Nick approached me with a bunch of roses. "Irene", he called, with eyes shining brightly and his face beaming kindly, "I brought these roses for you". Standing speechless as he reached to give me the roses, I noticed how Katy's face turned pale and heard her beg for the roses, her voice sounding like it was coming from the grave. Nick looked into my eyes, waiting to hear what to do with the roses he so kindly intended for me. I was so stunned by Katy's request and by her other worldly voice, and instructed Nick to give Katy the roses .

Looking back over the years I never regretted this. While I received plenty of roses from many friends since then, Katy never received another chance. Within four short years, she was taken to Auschwitz, heaped upon a pile of dead bodies in a horse cart, and taken to the crematorium. Katy's mother stood by helplessly as she heard the blood-curdling screams of her only daughter, taken to be burned alive at the age of fifteen. I've realized many times since then that we subconsciously feel some of the events that will take place in the future, even if we do not fully understand these premonitions.

Katy was a good friend of mine. We spent many happy hours together with some of my other close friends, like Vera and Alice, also of blessed memory. Their lives cut short mercilessly by the satanic hands of the Hungarian and German Nazi.

Jew-Hatred in the Air

Life went on as usual, but anti-Semitic winds were already hovering in the air. Busy with their everyday life, people in our town tolerated the unwanted Jews. During the two-thousand years of exile there were some better and some worse times for us, a persecuted, homeless nation, the world's great scapegoat.

Anti-Jewish graffiti started appearing on walls and on wooden fences. The slogan I can remember said, "chase the Jews to Madagascar". Some

thugs tried to attack Jews in the synagogue, but the local police chief somehow managed to stop them.

Dream of Secondary Education Shattered

I was twelve years old, and the moment I had so waited for had now arrived - it was time for me to register to secondary school in Puspokladany. But now the Hungarian government had begun to draft Jewish males to the army as forced laborers. My parents broke my heart when they told me that I could not go to secondary school, as the army may call my father any time, and I would have to take over his business. But, my father added, I could continue studying when the war ended. I was shocked, feeling cheated out of my childhood dream.

I often fought for my desires, but my parents' pronouncement left me too wounded to respond. The bitter disappointment froze my will, leaving my soul speechless. I was a bitter child with nobody to turn for help against my parents' decision. After encouraging me for so many years, my parents shattered my dreams to pieces. I walked longingly by the big secondary school building whenever I could, staring jealously at the children lucky enough to attend. To ease my pain, I tried to make friends with children who attended the school.

I continued to go to Hebrew school, often arriving first to the classroom. One morning, during the Chanukah holiday, I walked in and took my chair. The teacher got up, walked over to me and slapped me in the face with all his anger, adding scornfully, "why didn't you knock on the door". My blood froze, and I could not understand why he was so angry - we were never expected to knock on the door when we entered school. No one else had arrived, and I just ran out of the classroom and started to cry. When I went home at noon and told my parents what happened, my father told me he was to blame. They had played Chanukah cards the night before, and my father insulted the teacher with some rough words. I happened to be the scapegoat. This teacher used to be my favorite, but not anymore. I could not forgive him. I was one of his best pupils and he often praised me.

Our old rabbi passed away around this time. Some of us kids peeked through the window to see what a dead face looks like before the funeral procession started. I don't recall exactly what I saw, but I was very frightened. That night, I dreamt that my father took his own life and died.

For days I carried a heavy, terrible feeling. Never again did I wish to see a dead body.

Settling the Score with an Anti-Semite

My father often sent me alone during summer vacation to buy feathers. He took pride in my business skills. My brother escorted my one day when I made a big buy. Walking home, we encountered a gentile girl whom my friend Edith complained would harass her. I decided to settle the score with this anti-Semite and signaled her that I wanted a fight. She told me it was not fair to have my brother with me, so I asked him to go away and not to intervene .

As the fight started, she hit me with a glass jar and I scratched her face with all ten fingers. When blood started streaming down my face we both got frightened and ran away. It took me about twenty minutes to get home, where I started to cry and asked my mother to file a complaint against this girl with the police. My mother refused, telling me that she was sure it was I who started the fight. I said no more, stopped crying, and learned not to start fights any more.

Family Feud

I had some failings as a child, and this was not the only occasion where I misbehaved. During winter, my mother used to make her own matza-like crackers that we used instead of noodles in soup. Once, when we ate our Shabbat dinner, only one cracker remained on the table. My brother Shlomo and I reached for it at the same time, and neither of us expressed any willingness to let the other have it. Naturally, a fight broke out by the table. Shlomo, my favorite brother, scratched my left hand, while I scratched his face - utilizing my usual self-defense.

We each carried our scars; Shlomo's face featured several scratches, while my left hand had two deep lines. When I came to school on Sunday, the teacher walked between the pupils and came to a halt when he reached me. Looking down at my hand, he asked me, "Irene, who scratched your hand"? Too embarrassed to admit before the teacher and the whole class that I got into a fight with my own brother, I told a white lie, that the cat did it. The teacher pounced on my answer, smiled and looked at my brother as he said, "a cat with two legs". I felt so humiliated

as my face turned red. In my opinion, my brother should have been more considerate on Shabbat.

One more embarrassing episode in school comes to mind. Early one March, I walked home from school with my sister Yolan. The school had started rehearsals for the annual March 15 Independence Day celebrations, with teachers selecting only the outstanding pupils to participate. Yolan told me with great outrage that one of her classmates, Hedy, did not receive a part in the play, and that she cursed the teacher, saying that he should explode. I tried to calm Yolan down by saying, "so what if Hedy said the teacher should explode". The following day Yolan's teacher called me over and asked if it was true that I said he should explode. I turned angry and embarrassed as I tried to explain my side without naming the real culprit. My sister did me a great injustice and made me feel very shamed, singling me out as the wrongdoer instead of pointing to the real sinner.

Late spring that year, my maternal grandmother passed away. We all felt sorry for losing her, but mostly we felt sorry for my Mother - for her sorrow. I could never express my deep feelings in words; instead, I felt all her pain and sorrow in my soul. I so wanted my mother to be happy.

WITH AUNT IRENE AT HAJDUSAMSON [1940]

The End of Childhood Happiness

In the summer, we moved to a cement house on Poltenberg Street number eight. A few days before the move, my mother's half-sister, Irene, wrote us a letter asking that I go live with her. Irene's aunts and uncles left her alone when they moved to a big house they owned in the city of Debrecen, number six Garav Street. According to her instructions, I was to go on Thursday, leaving me just three days to prepare. First, I was to travel to my mother's first cousin, the Shiposh family, who lived in Debrecen, number thirty-six Josef Kiraby Herceg Street. They were to escort me to the train station, from where I would travel to the small town of Hajdusamson, where Irene would wait for me at the train station. I hardly had time to part from a few close friends!

I was very excited at first, but within a few moments dark shadows crept into my feelings. My father expressed great anger when my mother showed him the letter, and insisted that I not go. But my strong-willed mother had the last word and decided that I would go. And that was all. Nobody asked me if I wished to leave home to live with a fifty-six year old lady who never married, and who was raised from childhood by her grandmother and two aunts who also never married. A divorced uncle later joined them and that was her home. Irene's mother had passed away soon after her birth. I was thirteen years old, and had never met this aunt of mine before.

We moved to our new house and finished putting our belongings in place late at night. Then my father helped me pack and gave me instructions how to get to my relatives' house from the train station in Debrecen. We all went to bed late and tired. I got up early the next morning, drank a cup of coffee, took a sandwich to go, and kissed my family goodbye, my small pack beneath my arm. I left my little sister my shiny black boots and left my family, my sweet childhood home.

On this Thursday, I left behind my happy childhood years - and happiness itself. Alone on my way to a strange place, with a sad feeling. I walked through the main street of Puspokladony to the train station, bought my ticket, boarded the train and took my place by the window, watching the scenery rush by with tears in my eyes.

Stopover at Debrecen

Two hours later, with stops at Kaba and Hajduszoboslo along the way, I arrived at Debrecen and found my way out of the train station among the multitude of people. How I wished I could turn back and go home, but I was too scared to do so. Remembering my father's instructions exactly, I walked straight down a long street, then turned left at Josef Kiraby Herceg Street. The fear and excitement caused me to slow down, but I soon made it to number thirty six, my heart beating quickly and face red from confusion as I rang the doorbell.

An unknown face opened the door. Aunt Sara - my mother's cousin's wife - cordially introduced herself and welcomed me. She introduced me to her daughter-in-law, who had an infant girl. The Hungarian army had already taken Aunt Sara's son to forced labor - from where he never returned, like so many others like him in the Nazi era.

Aunt Sara lived in an elegant apartment with nice furniture. She suggested I sit in the fine rocking chair, which I did, but felt very uncomfortable. I missed the lightness of my happy home. Aunt Sara invited me to walk with her to her husband's office, which was located in the nearby home of her brother-in-law. This brother-in-law of hers had sent me many nice dresses previously worn by his daughters Vera and [Lsurse], dresses which my own parents could not afford.

When we arrived, Aunt Sara told me to wait outside. I felt very insulted; why shouldn't I join her - they were my relatives too! I wanted to meet them, especially the two girls. Perhaps she did not want them to see me in my worn-out coat, or maybe she did not want me to see how rich they were. At any rate, she apparently had no idea that thirteen-year-old girls have feelings too.

Other than that, Aunt Sara and - especially - Uncle Gesa welcomed me most warmly. They served a grandiose dinner and asked me how my family was doing. In turn, they told me about theirs. Aunt Sara escorted me to the train station after dinner, and bought my ticket. I thanked her for generosity, we said goodbye, and she left.

Depression Sets In

As I boarded the train to Hajdusamson - also known as "the small station of Debrecen" - an even greater sense of sadness possessed me. I felt very alone and depressed, having to face the unknown far away from my warm and loving family. The train moved along noisily, taking me further and further away from my carefree childhood years. As the train slowed down, I peered through the open window, my gaze falling on an elderly lady's face. I had never seen her before, but my instincts told me that this was Aunt Irene. I stepped down from the train uneasily, and Aunt Irene kissed me. I felt fear and coldness towards her from the moment I met her.

I had to stay with her for two short years, which seemed endless and unbearable at times. My ominous premonitions turned out to be too true. I had to attend one more year of school - for which she did not buy me the necessary books - but I finished with excellent marks anyway. I was a skinny girl, and Aunt Irene stuffed me with food. She also ordered very nice clothes for me. I appreciated that, but still was never able to warm up to her. Our inner worlds were too far apart, and I had to suppress my longing for my parents, my friends, my former surroundings and my freedom. I felt like I was in prison; it was a most unfortunate situation for me.

In the beginning, she occasionally invited girls my age to make me feel somewhat comfortable, and would let me visit my friends twice a week, Saturday and Sunday afternoon. Those were my few happy hours. Other than that, I had to be with her all the time. She was a highly religious lady, praying for hours in the morning and afternoon, even reciting prayers meant mainly for men. Some people nicknamed her the ["Pacsik (bowing) Lady"]. It was embarrassing to hear this from my friends, and I felt personally insulted whenever I heard this. I never told my aunt about her nickname.

To a certain degree I felt even sorry for her. She was a deeply religious saintly woman. She gave charity to many of the town's low-income poor Jewish families and to relatives too. Since I joined her, Irene sent my family twenty pengó - about \$10 at the time - each month, which took care of the rent. But I could have earned much more than that working at home, and already was. My mother thought it would be better for me to stay with my aunt.

My aunt subsequently did not let me visit friends. I had to stay home with her all Saturday and Sunday afternoon. When the weather was nice in the summer, we would take short walks and then sit inside the house. When it rained we would sit for a while by the courtyard.

Life beside her turned very dark for me and I almost forgot how to smile. Life with her was sad. I felt like I was in prison. She dominated me, as I lived in constant trepidation.

Welcome?

Aunt Irene acted very strangely toward me from the beginning. I arrived at her house on Thursday, and the next night we settled down at the nice Sabbath dinner table. After she sat down, I took the chair at the opposite end of the table. The next day I had to help turn over the rugs in honor of the Sabbath. When I turned the rugs in the opposite direction, she hollered at me, even though I had not done this on purpose. "Last night you seated yourself at the head of the table, and now I had to turn the rug your way," yelled Irene. "This is not going to work. Turn the rug the same direction that I do!" I did so, but the feeling of insult accompanied me the rest of my stay with her - nothing would change that.

Irene let me sleep on the big beg the first few days following my arrival. Then she instructed me to sleep on the couch as she returned to the big bed in the room. A bad sleeper from childhood, I turned constantly from side to side. Each move I made on the old couch yielded a noisy crack. The noise thoroughly aggravated her, and she accused me of making noise on purpose to make her nervous. She demanded I lie in bed like a piece of wood without the slightest move. It was very difficult for me to fall asleep ,but I tried not to move for hours. I often failed, with the couch creaking at the slightest move. Irene did not accept my explanation that I was not doing this to make her angry.

She often unfairly reprimanded me for doing things she did not like. I simply did not know what she expected me to do or not to do. One day she told me that she had been saving her jewelry for me, but that she would never give it to me because I was not nice enough to her. I cared little for her jewelry, but her unjust verdict really hurt me. With my childish innocence I so wanted to see her glad, but could not achieve this goal. She was a hard nut to crack, a kindly soul but unable to sense a child's

kindness towards her. She had to vent years of pent-up anger out on someone, and I was the victim of her whims. Later in life I came to realize that some people derive enjoyment from seeing other hurt.

Passover Respite

Ten months later Passover came, and she let me go home for the holiday, a short two days that I spent most happily with my family, visiting most of my school friends as well. They were all delighted to see me. A father of one of my friends promised me his son as my future fiance. But fate decided cruelly for this family of seven. This was the last I saw of them. Just a few months later they were deported with four other families with young children - including my Aunt Etelka and her twelve-year-old son Gyula - to be murdered in no-man's land. Oh, how a devilish force made a farce of humanity. Civilization etched nineteen forty-two in the calendar. Nazi Germany and its collaborators were in the midst of their mass murder of innocent human lives. The free world turned their heads away and let Hitler do the dirty work as they remained silent.

When the school year ended, life turned more unbearable. At least in school I could forget my bitter fate with Aunt Irene. I hungered for the warm and loving home which my parents deprived me of. During weekdays I performed light housekeeping like cleaning the kitchen, sweeping, tidying the courtyard and cleaning windows. During busy hours I stood in Aunt Irene's store and made sure customers did not take goods without paying for them. Many of the customers told me how beautiful I was and asked Aunt Irene who this nice girl belonged to. But my spirits ran very low.

Father!

One morning I was carrying home a heavy can of water (those small towns did not have running water), surrounded by the usual feeling of darkness. As I entered the house my aunt came from her adjoining store followed by someone. I was too depressed to even look to see who it was, until Irene told me to look who is here. The moment I looked up and saw my father's kind face smiling at me I turned into a different person. We embraced warmly as the "sunshine" melted away my misery. There is no word to describe the happiness I felt being close to my father.

A new animation surged into me, even though it was just a short visit. My father also used this occasion to inform me about the shocking deportation of some Jewish families from our town. He did not have to say what for, we both knew very well. A feeling of deep sadness seeped into our soul. The blood froze in our veins as a sense of mourning descended on us.

My father soon had to leave, my happiness to see him being short-lived. I escorted him far out to the green meadows on the outskirts of town. My father found a childhood friend along the way, Mrs. Klein, who was the mother of one of my new friends. They knew each other since their late teens, so we stopped a while and they had some time to refresh their memories. I told my father how homesick I was before he left, but he offered me no hope of escaping my present misery.

Cinderella

I returned to the harsh reality of life with Aunt Irene. The stovepipes quite often fell apart and I had to clean the soot. To make things worse, Irene accused me of not putting the pipes back together properly. I could not bear it, but said nothing, just swallowed the pain as the bitter tears streamed down my face .

There was a door from our bedroom to the store. Irene always locked this door when the store was closed, and kept the key in her pocket. I felt very insulted. One, day, I learned of her fears. She asked my to promise her that I would not secretly leave her .As my parents wanted me to stay with her, and I myself felt sorry for her, I promised her not to run away.

My daily household chores included light cleaning, helping in the kitchen - including washing dishes - and carrying water home. A young gentile lady came in to clean the house each week. She also took our laundry to her house, and I picked it up when it was ready.

Irene told me about another young gentile girl who worked for her, Zulishka. She served Irene faithfully for several years, but was a free-thinking, good-looking young girl. Zulishka fell in love with a young man and bore him four children without marrying him. Such behavior was unacceptable for all but the lowest classes in those days. Unfortunately, this sort of sinful behavior is open to all these days.

Small Pleasures

I spoke very little during those miserable years. My happy times came when one of my parents came to visit me, and twice each year when I would come home for two days for the holidays. I very much enjoyed the opportunity to be with my family and friends.

Once a week my aunt took the train to Debrecen to buy goods to sell in her store. I would have to get up very early in the morning and escort her to the train station, returning home before dawn. She usually returned home the same day, and I had to wait for at the train station in the afternoon. But on those occasions when she stayed overnight with her aunts in Debrecen I invited girl friends my age to sleep over. We had a ball joking and talking about boys. I almost forgot my misery !

More Black Days

My whimsical aunt. One "black" day she slapped my face so hard that blood started gushing from my mouth. I stood there stunned, wondering what I had done to deserve such treatment. We had just finished lunch, and I was sweeping as she recited the grace after meals - one of my regular chores. Then she hollered at me: "the dust pan is tameh (impure) - don't you dare sweep while I am blessing". The sore healed and the pain abated, but the wounds in my soul stayed forever. Hardly, a fourteen-year-old child, the smile disappeared from my face. My aunt and I lived under the same roof, but an ocean of ice separated between us. From that day on I prayed for a miracle which would set me free, to return to the warmth of my family.

I so missed the freedom of my parents' home, living in degrading conditions. One day she left town and forgot to take the keys out of the door that led to the store. On days she left home, Aunt Irene usually left me two eggs and some fat to prepare scrambled eggs for lunch, but on this day she also forgot to leave me the fat, which she kept in the store. I was too afraid to touch the keys and open the door to the store, so I made scrambled eggs in a dry skillet.

Let Me Come Home!

Another time when my aunt was out of town I recall standing by the window, changing the bed sheets and noticing someone trying to unlatch

the outside gate. Wondering who it could be, a sudden rush of happiness took me over as I saw my father. I rushed to him and immediately made him lunch - scrambled eggs with some bread. Since Irene left me only two eggs, I had no lunch myself that day, but I was not hungry. It was the worth the while giving up lunch to be with him. We were both overjoyed to be with each other, even for just a short while. I escorted my father to the outskirts of town, told him how homesick I was and complained that my aunt slapped me. My father listened sadly as I expressed my pressing wish to go home but offered no solutions .

I complained again when I came home for the holidays, but neither my aching body nor my shattered soul changed my parents' mind. The holidays ended and I had to go back to that place I so hated, Aunt Irene's house.

Another happy day came once when I waited for my aunt at the train station and saw a familiar, kind, humble face shining with warm love through the train's open window. It was my mother. She came to brighten my life for a short while. My parents also sent me letters every now and then, making me very happy.

The Jew Haters Next Door

Irene's next door neighbors, the Jew-hating Suvoltas family, made my aunt's life miserable. One morning we could not open the house's front door. We looked from the window and saw a huge wooden box full of heavy stones and metal rods blocking the door. There were dirty words scrawled on the box, and they yelled at us. My courageous aunt yelled back fearlessly.

During those two years I learned of the cruel fate of the Jewish people. The Jewish Hungarian paper, delivered by mail each Friday, wrote about the persecution, expulsion, burning at the stake, murder of individuals, then by the hundreds, and then by the tens of thousands of Jews. The Spanish inquisitors, the Crusaders, the Russians, Kozaks and who not. Those terrible lines filled my eyes with tears, my heart in deep sadness.

The loneliness of life with my aunt and the frequent conflict with the Suvoltas family took its toll on me. All the pressure that I choked inside me had to burst out. I cried so hard one day that my aunt took me to a doctor, who advised her to send me to the mountains for a couple of

weeks for vacation. Instead, Irene decided to send me home for a vacation. It sounded too good to be true. The sun shining through to my heart as my aunt escorted me to the "big" train station of Debrecen, I offered Irene to send my younger sister to stay with her in my stead .

Goodbye Irene

But once the gates of my freedom opened I intended to take full advantage of the new situation. I told the story to my parents, who were surprised to see me. Two years of torment were now over, with my father escorting my sister to the train station early the following morning. I asked my father to have Aunt Irene pack up all my belongings, as I would never return to her. Once again I was surrounded with the warm love of my family, the welcome company of my school friends, and the familiar streets I so enjoyed walking on. Who could guess that in less than two years all this happiness and freedom would cruelly end forever.

PUSPOKLADANY – PART II

My Father the Convict

It was now almost summer, 1942. Nazi Germany had barbarously occupied most of Europe. Hungary was not yet completely ruled by Hitler's Nazi lawlessness, although we Jews lived in constant persecution and hardship. Our sources of income were limited by special laws, and a Hungarian Christian feather dealer unjustly reported my father to the authorities. The anti-Semitic verdict, two months in prison .

It was a very sad and shaming period for our family. At fourteen, I became the main breadwinner. Instead of feeling pride I felt humiliated buying and selling goose feathers and down, and dried animal skins. We exchanged letters with my father. My older brother sometimes helped out by carrying heavy loads, but I took care of all of the business side of things.

During those two sad months, which included the High Holidays, my older brother Sanyi secretly left home. One of the local boys had a bad influence on him. This boy promised him a "rosy" life in the big city of Budapest, where my brother could find a well-paying job. In Puspokladany, Sanyi worked as an apprentice for a master who took advantage of him and worked him hard, twelve hours every day. The man paid him nothing - only a lunch and snack. It was like that when one learned an occupation.

But, it seems Budapest was not for everybody a "rosy" promising place after all. At the end of the fifth day my brother Sanyi was back. When he came home he felt so humiliated that he dared not enter the house for a very long time and sat by the outhouse. After a while we told him he was forgiven and that he should come home. He told us about his adventures, and returned to his previous employer, working for nothing.

At last, the two months passed, and my father came home. He lost some weight, but we were so happy just to see him home with us. He elevated our spirits - his face radiated joy into our heart and soul. Just being near him was a privilege.

I'm a Feather Trader

At Hajdusamson, where I spent two years, school ended after sixth grade. In Puspokladany, it became compulsory to attend school through eighth grade, so all my former classmates were still in school. I felt a mixture of insult and envy because my parents cut down my chance at education.

I saw less of my classmates during the week, and my father took good care of my free time. He took me along with him to the far away towns where he conducted his business. I would go back to these places alone and always make good deals. Later, my father would give me instructions how to get to towns where I had never been. I traveled either by train or by bike, which I particularly enjoyed, with the fresh air at the outskirts of town, the enticing orchards or the beautiful green meadows.

Once, I went to Nadudvar by bike to buy some merchandise and have it sent by train. I carried a large sum of money bound in a handkerchief which I held in my hand, along with the bike handle. A good-looking young man soon appeared. He started a conversation with a friendly, "have a nice day, young lady". I hid my fears by answering him, "good day, sir". He told me that he is carrying a large sum of money in his handbag, and has a revolver in his pocket for protection. He proudly added that he is a clerk at the Futura Company of Nadudvar, traveling home from Futura of Puspokladany, where he sold a large crop. Futura is what the Hungarian farmers' cooperative was called at the time, summer 1943. I dared not declare that I was also carrying some money, even if it was much less than what he had. Responding to his question about why I was going to Nadudvar, I told him only that I was going to visit my relatives, the Bleier family, letting him understand that I was Jewish. He said he knew them, and revealed no anti-Semitic inclinations as he continued to converse with me. I breathed a sigh of relief when we arrived at his office and he wished me a good day again.

Growing Fears of Hitler

After returning from Hajdusamson I too often heard one of our neighbors, Lilike, tell my mother will annihilate us too, just like he is doing to our Jewish brethren throughout Europe. My mother always responded that the Almighty would protect us. Lilike just smiled, but she was firmly convinced that what she said would happen. And it truly did. But at the time we were too preoccupied with everyday life, trying to overcome the

economic hardships which the Hungarian government decreed on us Jews. We felt happy just being alive, with a decent income, a home and the ability to come and go as we pleased. We continued to humbly live our lives as Jews in the face of all the hardships.

I recall one day when my mom sent me to buy eggs from one of our Christian neighbors, the Karob family. One of the girls who tried to be "friendly" with me asked some ignorant, degrading questions. "Is it true that you Jews mix your unleavened bread with the blood of a Christian child for your Passover holiday?" It was the first time I heard this brutal accusation.

Shocked as I was, I could answer the question immediately. Even the youngest Jewish child knows that it is forbidden to eat blood. When Jews slaughtered animals, the Christian people came with dishes to collect the flowing blood, which they took home and ate! Afterwards, we throw the veins from the neck into the garbage, soak and salt the animal to make sure it is completely rid of blood, because our Torah forbids us from eating blood.

Did You Kill God?

The friendly girl next asked if it was true that the Jewish people killed God. I answered that presumptuous question with a definite "no", but later delved into the question further. How was it possible for a human being to kill God, or even the Son of God? Also, the Ten Commandments prohibit us from killing. How does one become the Son of God? The Almighty is the creator of all living creatures, so everyone has the right to call themselves the Children of the Almighty.

The question haunted and humiliated me. I could not rest until I found a satisfactory answer, and I encountered quite a few theories over the years. Myriam was married to Joseph when her child was born, but conceived before her marriage. One version has it that a former fiancé or Miryam begot the child out of vengeance. Another version blames a Roman soldier for raping her, a frequent occurrence during those years of Roman occupation. The child was named Yeshua. Some of his classmates derided him because of his origins. Yeshua tried to reform the Jewish religion and attracted followers to the new religion which he began to openly advertise. Yeshua learned medicine from some of his rabbis,

and used his ability to heal the sick to fool people into believing he was the Son of God. Some people also said that Yeshua hypnotized people.

The Roman invaders forbade this new religion and subjected those caught practicing it to death sentences. The barbaric Romans tortured people who were sentenced to capital punishment by death on the cross. Some people claimed to have seen Yeshua alive after he was killed on the cross - how could that be? One version I heard was that as the Jewish religion forbids shaming the human body, some people took Yeshua off the cross, when he was actually still alive. So he didn't die on the cross, but had to live in hiding in fear of the Roman authorities. Thus it was possible to falsely claim that he was raised from the dead .

Nobody could now prove if any of these versions was true or not. Every man has the right to follow his own religion - but without inflicting harm, shaming or espousing hatred against people with differing beliefs. It is most unfortunate that Christians continue to degrade Jews and spread hatred because of the false belief that the Jews killed their Son of God. If that is not enough, a religious leader, the German-born Luther, wrote an entire book full of false and humiliating accusations against Jews. How can they base their religion on the seeds of hatred that led to the murder of so many innocent people? How is it possible to hold the Bible in one hand and a merciless sword in the other?

Breaking Off Old Friendships

On Saturday afternoons I would wait at Kossuth Street at about four o'clock for Vera to finish her religious class. We beamed with joy as we caught glances of each other. Then we would go to her house and spend some wonderful time together. Together with other friends, I also visited Vera on Sunday afternoons. Our best times, however, were when the two of us were alone - we did all sorts of mischievous deeds.

One Sunday afternoon we organized a picnic tour to a place on the outskirts of town known as "treasure hill". We enjoyed a school outing there several years back and so wished to recapture the bygone happiness of our early childhood. But to no avail. Instead, a strange chill took us over.

On another Sunday afternoon I went to visit Edith, an older friend of mine. Hardly had I closed the door behind me when Edith's mother stepped in,

declaring that Edith has to study. I felt humiliated and never visited her house again, except when Edith begged me to come over some time later when we were in the ghetto, and again after the war.

After this insulting incident at Edith's house I broke off my friendships with Vera and all of my other friends who attend school as well. My heart ached and I regretted this for the rest of my life, as Vera was a soul-to-soul friend. But I was too bitter at being deprived the chance to attend secondary school to maintain the friendships.

I spent most weekdays conducting business in and out of town. On Sunday afternoons I kept busy visiting another friend of mine named Edith, with whom I'd visit her married sister. They had a bicycle rental establishment. A young man who worked there had a brother in whom I was interested, but who lived in a different town. My friend Edith probably also put her eye on this very handsome boy. She always asked the bicycle shop employee about his brother, so I got to hear all the information about my secret chosen friend. I was glad to hear the answers to all the questions I myself was too ashamed to ask, especially about when a visit of his to our town was coming up. I counted the days when I would be able to see him in person. It would have been inappropriate for me to talk to a boy, but I very much hoped that he would find me as his chosen one when we reached adulthood.

One of my neighbors introduced me to a new friend, Erzse Koti. I often visited her to hear many nice songs on her gramophone .

But time was short. Soon the Nazi cruelty would close in on us. My life's spring would reach its end. During this short, last happy summer for the Jews of Puspokladany, my contentment included closing business deals, hearing about my "chosen one, listening to music at Erzsike's house, and reading books for hours on end.

One Sunday afternoon, strolling by my dear friend Vera's house with two other girls, I exchanged greetings with Vera's mother. Then she told me, "Irene, now that you've grown up, Vera isn't good enough for you anymore!" I stood silently, too embarrassed to say anything. How I wished not to neglect our friendship, but I had no inkling that she missed me at all! She was four years my junior. Everyone laughed at me because of the age difference, even my teachers. She paid me back later, in the ghetto

courtyard .When I greeted her, she just turned her head haughtily. I left her at that.

More Anti-Semitic Laws

Summer passed, autumn came. The latest anti-Semitic Hungarian laws further restricted our business trade, limiting the weight of merchandise Jews could send. One of my father's friends helped us circumvent the regulations by letting my father write his name as the sender of goods. Thus, we prepared packages addressed from two different senders - my father and his friend - in order to evade the new law.

The local gendarme weighed each consignment we sent by rail, and my father also had to present himself at the gendarme's office each time for formalities. My father asked me to join him each time and I had to rent a bicycle in order to reach the train station. Riding later in the afternoon one day, and with no headlight on my bicycle, a driver came from the opposite direction and hit the front wheel of my bicycle. Instead of apologizing, Mr. Ragyva, the Jew-hating local fireman, blamed me for the accident. I had to carry back the bike, with its crooked front wheel, to the rental agency. I felt so angry and feared that I would have to pay for the damage, but Zoli, being a fine young man, gave me a replacement bicycle right away. Father waited on me in the company of a gendarme. We walked into the office, both of us in a dejected mood. We were afraid that the gendarme would discover our illegal shipping method, but after interrogating us he just asked my father to sign a firm verifying that he was the sender of the merchandise and let us go.

I grew up sixteen years in the midst of an anti-Semitic environment that included hatred and humiliation directed from part of the Christian population. The Hungarian government passed laws that gradually limited our trade and hardened our existence. We had to swallow our dignity and accept a limited, humiliating form of life. Having no choice, we did so.

During those short years, I know of very few families who left our town to foreign lands. But they really should have, as it was no secret that Jewish lives were going up in flames or down in mass graves by the hundreds of thousands in neighboring countries.

Goose-Liver Smuggler

The somewhat happy summer of 1943 passed, and autumn went by like a cool mist. The last happy winter lasted until March 19, 1944, and included a brief upturn in our fortunes. My father found a new business connection in the big city of Budapest and trained my brother Sandor in the business. They went there together by train.

My father and brother once also delivered a rare delicacy - a pair of kosher, slaughtered ducks to their Budapest contact. They left the train in full confidence with their two brown bags. On their short walk from the train station, they suddenly felt a strong force pulling the bags from underneath their arms. Turning around to catch the thief, they found themselves looking face to face at a uniformed Budapest policeman. As the policeman went on his way without saying a word, they took the clue and did likewise.

The next order of Budapest business fell on me, the merchandise traveling by freight train, myself by third class coach train. My father gave me an additional consignment to take along - a big goose liver packed in parchment paper, hid underneath my shirt. I stood near the outer part of the train on that cold winter day, so that the goose liver would not warm up and drip on my body. I easily found our business contact, an observant Jewish lady who took me to her nearby home where I delivered the goods.

I received a good sum of money for the feathers and goose liver. My whole family was happy and it seemed that our future looked brighter. We earned a much higher profit by dealing directly with Budapest. Encouraged by my business skills, my father decided to buy me a motorcycle. I would have to wear long pants, something unheard of for girls in the Puspokladany Jewish community. Like women's liberation!

NAZI OCCUPATION OF HUNGARY

March 19, 1944

But our hopes for a brighter future ended abruptly on March 19, 1944. That day delivered Hungarian Jewry's greatest catastrophe, as Hitler's murderous robbers (they called themselves soldiers) invaded Hungary. Dark clouds hovered above us. Every time I recall this day it feels like disaster bells pound my head.

The German beasts quickly came out with a series of anti-Jewish laws. They forbade us from having any contact - business or otherwise - with non-Jews. Christians could not sell Jews milk or butter, were not allowed to step into Jewish homes or have Jews visit them.

Tragic Fate of a Righteous Gentile Family

Most of our Christian neighbors gladly obeyed these barbaric laws, while very few remained friendly. Some continued to sell us milk and butter, bringing us the goods by the dark of night so that our Jew-hating neighbors would not report them to the authorities. The Pap family even brought us butter when we were imprisoned in the ghetto, throwing it over the high fence into the yard and risking being caught by the anti-Semitic patrol .

In a twist of fate, the Pap family tragically lost their only son, Elek, a handsome lad with bad morals, as the war neared its end. While engaged to a prominent young girl, Elek seduced another young girl, hardly sixteen years old. She became pregnant and hanged herself in a barn, as it was unforgivable for small town girls from good families to behave like this those days. Elek felt guilty and swallowed a large dose of aspirin, although he probably did not really wish to die. Elek's parents called the Jewish doctor, Oskar Szuks, who administered a gastric lavage and saved Elek's life. After this degrading event, Elek's fiance broke off the engagement .

Less than two years later, Elek found a new victim for his fiery desires, a good looking and intelligent girl who was studying agronomy. This eighteen-year-old girl was engaged to a handsome young man who was also studying agronomy, in a different town. While her parents went for an overnight vacation, Elek visited her, and she, too, became pregnant with

Elek's child. Back at school, her shame grew obvious, and she hanged herself on a tree on the school premises .

Eighteen months later Elek's was traveling with his army regiment on a freight train from Germany to Sweden. It was so crowded that soldiers went on top of the cars. Elek stood erect on the top, as the train suddenly passed through a dark tunnel. The collision instantly cut Elek's head off from his body. When Elek's best friend came home after the war, he didn't have the heart to tell his parents how he witnessed their only son's death. So they hoped for his return until the end of their own lives.

The Yellow Star

Radio broadcasts unceasingly bawled out anti-Jewish slogans. A shopkeeper once turned the radio on loud when I was the only Jew amongst many Christians. I believe he did so on purpose, to embarrass me. I had to hear the humiliating declarations from the dirty mouth of a member of the Hungarian parliament over and over again. As he yelled with all his strength, I wished the earth would open its mouth and swallow me, my face red from humiliation. I stood numbly, unable to move from this cursed place for quite some time. I so wanted to exit the place with some pride, but was too hurt to hold my head up, and left the place for good, never again to enter it.

April 4, 1944; the Hungarian government introduced a degrading law forcing us to wear a yellow star on the left side of our clothes. Whoever disobeyed would be punished. My father prepared perfect yellow stars for each of us. Sad reflections overtook his face as he worked.

My father's instruction that I put on the yellow star filled me with enormous hatred and depression. We always showed great respect and love to both our parents - especially to our father - but now I had to refuse. "I cannot wear the disgracing badge", I told my father. My father answered that I should wear the star with pride. "Show them that your are proud to be a Jew", he said.

"I am proud to be a Jew", I told my father. "But that pride does not mean that I will let them degrade me and make me a laughing stock". Those barbaric demands deeply hurt my self-dignity. The first day I wore the yellow star fell on my seventeenth birthday. Instead of marking the spring

of life, my birthday turned into a dark omen for many more hopeless days that followed shortly.

Living in Nazi occupied Hungary, our already great anxiety intensified with this new law. People pondered if our fate was now sealed like the rest of European Jewry, who faced extermination in Nazi extermination camps. Very few of us believed that we would escape the cruel Nazi clutches .

Parents also worried that brutal Nazi soldiers would harm their unmarried daughters. My father proposed that I fictitiously marry a local boy, but I became suspicious and did not consent. I also told my father that I could not marry this boy, as I already put my eyes on the boy's younger brother. My father thus abandoned his plans to find me a husband. He continued to fear that German soldiers would attack me and suggested I stay indoors. I could not do that - just had to walk about outside and feel the atmosphere.

I promised my father that I would not let anyone harm me so long as I was alive - just over my dead body. Thanks to the Almighty, nobody harmed me this way. I once had a close call when a childhood archenemy of mine came to enjoy the sight of Nazi invaders in our town, and noticed me near an SS soldier who stood guard by city hall. He tried as hard as he could to get the SS soldier to harm me, but being a stupid ignoramus, this teenage boy did not know German. So all he could do was point at me and repeatedly yell, "Juda, Juda". The Nazi soldier completely disregarded the peasant boy as I quietly walked away .

The Ghetto

Another anti-Jewish law shortly passed, forcing us to leave our homes and be concentrated in a ghetto. This was a very distressing period for us. The Hungarian army called up my father for forced labor. Jewish men had been called for this purpose several years back; most had already died from hunger, been beaten or froze to death.

The Allied Forces started conducting air raids since the Nazi occupation began. Looking up at the planes in the sky, I wondered why the free countries don't do something to help us Jews before the Nazis exterminate us. We were innocent victims, and they could have helped us if they wanted to. My soul directed a silent prayer to them - please help us escape the devil's clutches.

Restless and depressed, we could not stay at home. I tried to think if there was some way to stop the pending disaster. But I could not come up with any comforting answers as I walked the familiar streets of Puspokladany.

- Why is the sun not shining in my soul anymore?
- Why can't I feel what happiness means anymore?
- Why has darkness struck at my world?
- Why is the devil ruling human souls?
- Why is he turning them into cruel forces?
- Why are the hopes of innocent people being shattered?
- Why has the world kept silent at our loss?

There were so many why's then, and there are still too many why's today. There are no satisfactory answers to explain the endless suffering of the Jewish faith. Will justice ever prevail on earth? Will the time ever come when people come to tolerate each other and let them live peacefully? The devil prevailed and took our fate into his cruel hands.

Our New "Home"

May 18, 1944; we had to move into the ghetto. On that very same day my father left us forever. The army called him up and he had to present himself at the army headquarters for forced labor service in the disreputable city of Gyoma. Thus the unimaginable became true. How can a government expel its own innocent citizens without justification and call this "law". God fearing people - infants, children and adults - anyone born to a Jewish mother up to three generations back had their fate sealed. None had ever committed serious crimes against the law of God, government or mankind.

The ghetto compound included our temple, the Jewish school, and some surrounding houses. Conditions were terribly overcrowded, and our family was quartered in the temple's stable area. I sometimes thought about running away, perhaps asking one of our Christian neighbors to help me. But I never came to do it. If our neighbors really sympathized with us they would have offered to hide us without being asked. They must have hated their Jewish neighbors, due to the lies of religion on which they were raised. They singled out one Jew to falsely extol and pray to as the Son of the Almighty (can't we all share this claim equally), while hating the rest of

the Jews. Why did we have to suffer for two thousand years because of the son of a Roman soldier and Jewish seamstress?

I painted the two small storage rooms that would be our premises two days before moving into the ghetto. We were somewhat fortunate to receive this abode, as some families shared small houses with others. Some had to live in degrading conditions in the temple itself, which was quite overcrowded. The local gendarme decided where each family would live, making sure that conditions would be intolerable.

My father very much hoped that our town of Puspokladany would soon be liberated from Nazi rule by the advancing Russian army (indeed, this happened within three months), so he made sure that some of our property was kept in safe hands. He packed 100 kilograms of natural goose down and merchandise under order by the big machine he invented - separating the down from the feathers. Thus, when he returned home he would be able to begin making a living right away. My father assured us that he would return from the army as soon as our town was liberated, and that in the meantime we would be safe in the ghetto. Before going away, my father bought my mother a white goat, so that she could have milk with her coffee every day!

Thursday morning, May 18, 1944. Dawn came upon us. The beginning of our official expulsion by our own government from our rightly owned homes. We packed our modest belongings - some furniture, a kitchen stove, kitchenware and some pots - and were ready to be transferred to the ghetto. The government arranged our move itself to make sure that no Jew would escape. They brought a peasant with his horse-cart for this task.

My Father's Last Farewell

Unspeakable sorrow filled our deeply shocked hearts as we left our warm homes. With a gloomy face that reflected how we all felt, my father put on his backpack and said his last farewell to us. I silently escorted my father to the train station. We walked side-by-side for thirty short minutes before he arrived at the appointed place. My father met other forced laborers there, including a childhood friend of his. A pair of local gendarmes yelled at me and told my father to board the train, which was already waiting. I choked back the tears as I parted from my father. I stayed on to see him

take a seat in the train, a cigarette in his mouth and his reddish brown face with a very sad expression. This was the last time I ever saw him.

The parting from my father reminds me of an episode about another relative murdered by the Nazis. It relates to my first cousin Bela, born in 1927, like me. Both his parents (his mother was my father's sister), his two younger brothers <Terenire, Tomas> and he perished in gas chambers - nobody survived the murderous clutches of Nazi Germany.

After finishing secondary school, Bela worked as an apprentice for a dental technician in Puspokladany, living with his employer's family. When the Nazis invaded, they took over many houses owned by Jews, including this family's house. The head of the household had already been taken to forced labor service so only the employer's wife and Bela were there. The wife moved to live with friends, and Bela pretended he was a non-Jew, utilizing his limited knowledge of the German language to become friendly with those SS soldiers. For a short while, this scheme worked for Bela, or at least he thought it did. Then one night one of the SS soldiers entered Bela's room dead drunk and woke him up shouting, "you dirty Jew, who do you think you're fooling, I'll kill you right now", as he pointed his gun at Bela's head. Scared to death, Bela packed his belongings the next day and parted from us as he prepared to return to his parents in Nadudvar. Bela offered me his camera, and my parents let me ride my bike with him to Nadudvar to pick it up.

Years before, when we were both thirteen, Bela declared he would marry me when we turned eighteen. I never intended to accept his proposal - first, because he was my first cousin, and second, because at the age of ten I had already selected my future husband. Now, nearing Nadudvar, he must have subconsciously felt that his days on earth were numbered, so he proposed to marry me on the spot. He was deeply depressed when I refused. He gave me his camera as soon as we reached my aunt's house, and we exchanged farewells, both of us soon to enter the ghetto.

Adjusting to the Ghetto

The day after we entered the ghetto we were still allowed to walk freely outside. It was around noon on Friday, and my steps led me to our former home. I took a book with me and stretched out on the beautiful green grass, so wanting to recapture some of the old joy of home. But to no

avail. Everything that had happened put an enormous strain on my brain. The pain choked deeply into the roots of my soul.

By Friday night, a tall fence surrounded the ghetto premises. We were imprisoned like criminals, all of us depressed. The darkness that struck our world kept intensifying.

Together with some other goat owners, we took our animals to graze twice daily, looking all around the ghetto for some green grass. This was one of my small pleasures in the ghetto. A jealous lady tried to chase us away from the area around where she lived ,but we could care less - our animals had to eat!

Once we saw my old friend Vera with a bunch of girls. I approached her, but she turned her head away haughtily, so I just continued walking with my fellow goat shepherds. The memory of Vera's insulting behavior flashed back in my mind many times since then. Within a month, Vera perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. I don't know if she regretted what she did before eternal darkness possessed her, but, at any rate, I forgave her. I will always remember Vera as a very dear childhood friend. God bless her martyred soul.

Within a few days, eighteen-nineteen year-old boys were drafted to perform forced labor. They were served one-hour notice to present themselves at the schoolyard with a backpack. The group was composed of about twenty boys, including my brother Sanyi and his good friend - the one I dreamed I would marry since the age of ten. I escorted my brother and gazed at the object of my dreams, boding them farewell and a successful return. I was happy at least to have a chance to tell my chosen one that I prayed for him to return home safely.

The gendarme served notice to hand over valuables such as cameras, radios and jewelry. I decided not to give away the camera cousin Bela gave me and hid it beneath a low roof in a storage house. However, my mother so feared the official thieves that she handed over my camera. I was very angry, but did nothing about it.

My friend Edith, an only child, showed up one day at my place and invited me over. We walked over there, but it was too crowded for us to talk. Her family and two others - ten souls in all - shared one big room.

One afternoon, two gendarmes accompanied a representative of each family out the ghetto gates. As this "charade" continued, we were escorted back to our houses like criminals, with a list of the contents made and officially stamped, the keys then being left with the gendarmes.

The ghetto became even more crowded when Jews from Foldes and Hajdudorog, two smaller towns, were taken there.

Our father wrote us regularly. He was transferred to Debrecen, where he met his tragic death.

A Farmer's Slave Laborers

Hardly two weeks passed in the ghetto when fifty young Jewish girls were taken to work on one of the big farm estates in Puspokladany. We received no pay, only meager food rations, just like prisoners. My friend Edith's mother volunteered to join us, to look after the fifty girls and to be with her daughter. She tried her best to feed vegetarian style, as the Christian farmer did not provide any meat. We worked in the green meadow from early morning to late at night, with only a half-hour break for lunch. We slept on the bare earth at night, in highly cramped conditions .

On Saturday afternoon, we were taken back to the ghetto to take baths in the community bathhouse. It was so degrading to be paraded atop horse-carts through the main street of Puspokladany on our holy Sabbath. To intensify the degradation, the parade took place at the busiest time, when the Puspokladany residents were out strolling following church services. Our spiritual and mental condition numbed so that verse from Psalms, "they have eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear", aptly applied to us. We just choked in the painful feeling deep inside our hearts, becoming more depressed. The farm work itself was bearable - under different circumstances it may have even been fun. If only we could forget that our own government stripped of us all human rights and our dignity, turning us into the slave prisoners of the twentieth century.

The hovering peril seeped deep into our senses. Its influence froze the blood in our veins, our destiny permeated with hopelessness. One brave girl used to sing to overcome the evil and elevate our mood. Her song expressed hope and a yearning to return to our Hungarian home. She sang with such intensive feeling - I do not know why, as it was the Hungarian government which exiled us.

An order to pack our belongings and return to the ghetto came suddenly one afternoon. We had to quit work and go right away. Some of the girls cried hysterically, fearful that we would now all be taken with our families to Hitler's death camps. I was scared stiff and overcome by tears, my brain stiffened by the worry. With great pain, we boarded the horse-cart.

Thus began our banishment from the land we were born in, grew up in, loved and honored. We were miseducated to believe that this was our homeland; and we really believed so - but not any more. The hour of doom struck like lightning.

Six horse-carts filled with fifty young Jewish girls made their way through town. Some of us cried uncontrollably, the tears streaming down our faces. The others just cried inside in their hearts. Starting at the outskirts of town, we passed by the Jewish cemetery. Two girls wailed bitterly at this point, bidding farewell to their dead - one to her late mother, the other to her late father. Then through the streets - Arpad, Kossuth, Hosok tere, Borskag. Many people stared at the pitiful sight. If they felt sympathy to the humiliated girl prisoners, none showed any signs.

DEPORTATION

June 18, 1944: Destination Auschwitz

Shamed, degraded and with pent up pain, we finally arrived in the ghetto. Under such sad circumstances, one cannot even say that we were glad to still find our loved ones in the ghetto. The fearful day was Thursday, with our final expulsion scheduled for the coming Sunday, June 18, 1944.

The gendarme instructed us to prepare two weeks of food to take with us for the coming journey to the Auschwitz death camps. We could take one backpack of personal belongings for each person - no more. We felt like we were in the clutches of Satan those last few days, like part of us was already dead. The Hungarian decree cruelly decreed to extradite us to German Nazi hands, well aware that we would be annihilated. Our last spark of hope was extinguished, as was our faith in mankind.

We somehow mustered enough strength to prepare for our disastrous journey. Spring came in vain, winter reigned in our hearts. The blood-curdling events vanished the flowers blooming beautifully in town from our view. All I saw around me were the sad stares of my old school mates.

How could all the nations of the world keep silent in the face of this unbelievably barbaric behavior? I still could not believe how our own government was stripping us of all our human rights this unmerciful day, my soul bleeding profusely. They were stripping us of life itself as they transferred us to the German Nazi death factories. Decent citizens of Hungary were mercilessly thrown out of their own homes, and then out of the crowded ghetto prison too. All this because we followed our Jewish religion. Those Nazis and their comrades must be sick in the head, poisoned from early childhood by the hatred espoused in the name of Christianity. They were educated to hate, envy and kill their Jewish neighbors.

I still cannot understand why human beings kill people because of differing religious beliefs. Let's hope that Hitler's Nazis are the last to perform acts such as this cruel annihilation of millions of innocent souls. People should work together to create peaceful coexistence for all mankind.

Contradictory thoughts overtook me. On the one hand, I very much wished to disobey these inhuman decrees, run away and hide somewhere. On the other, strong fears stifled my feelings and paralyzed my body, leaving me unable to resist those devilish decrees.

I am sure that many others also felt this dissonance. We lived under great mental pressure, paralyzing fear. Our feelings were stifled, and our brains were unable to think clearly - as if dark clouds floated in our heads. With reality not penetrating into our mind and our judgement impaired, we went like sheep to be slaughtered in Hitler's death camps by those barbaric beasts.

Packing Up

June 18, 1944, early afternoon - all the Jews of the ghetto stood by the gate in the schoolyard. Those of us who owned goats had to hand them over to the gendarmes - I still recall how our goat cried. Even animals have feelings.

A local Christian midwife had to undress all us women over 16 years old and check our bodies for hidden gold or jewelry. We all crowded into a classroom for this degrading event, but the woman did nothing to us. We just lingered there for a few minutes without being molested. Girls with long hair had to have their hair cut.

We stood in the courtyard with our meager possessions in the one backpack we were allowed to take. The gendarme officer asked if anyone still had any valuables - there were none. Then he shouted that if one person tried to escape, ten people would be shot dead. An old man, Mr. Schwartz, cried out, "someone please give me rope so that I can hang myself and die here. I do not want to go to a death camp to be killed by Hitler. I would rather do it with my own hands." Mrs. Grunfeld, a mother of four small children, quitted him down and asked him not to stir up a panic.

By now, some "good-hearted" Christian peasants came with their horse-carts to conclude the final act of our expulsion from our hometown. We stayed back with our mother toward the end of the long line, still not ready to digest the catastrophe unfolding before our very eyes. We tried to dream a miracle, that the Hungarian government would somehow withdraw this inconceivable decree before our turn came to leave the ghetto. But our turn did come. Our backpacks already heaped upon the

horse-cart, our hearts bleed as heavy-as-lead legs carried us through the ghetto gate.

The Christian bystanders outside stared at our mournful procession. We had to march behind the horse-carts with our packs. It was like a funeral. Most of the people in the procession were, in fact, marching to their own funeral. As night fell, our future seemed darker and darker.

Human Cargo in Cattle Cars

We arrived at the railroad station, where empty cattle cars waited for us. Ninety people had to crowd themselves into each car. We had to jump down from the platform into the car, and many people badly hurt themselves in the process. It was so crowded that we had to sit on each other, unable to move our legs. The heavy doors soon closed and we were locked in. An eerie quite encompassed the gloomy situation.

Our transport traveled swiftly. We had no idea as to our next destination. The following day, a black Monday, at around 5 PM, the train came to a sudden halt. We heard some cries, fear creeping under our skin. My mother ordered me to get rid of the photographs of friends and family that I brought along. The gendarmes may beat me up if they find them. I promptly hid the photos between the side and the ceiling of the boxcar. I wonder if anyone ever found them.

Gendarme's Rude Greetings

A gendarme, shouting and cursing, greeted us as the heavy doors opened. He ordered us to quickly get out with our backpacks. We then witnessed a bloodcurdling sight: a gendarme was brutally beating up a good friend of my father, Mr. Schonfeld, and his sister-in-law.

The gendarmes ordered us to line up five to a row to be counted. Then we marched into a big building with no roof. A young girl from our town was being hanged from the building by her hands and legs. A couple of gendarmes beat her all over her body with their hands and guns. The girl screamed and cried bitterly. The gendarmes poured many liters of water over her so that she would wake up after fainting, and then kept beating her. Blood and tears streamed down her crucified body all the while. Oh, those barbaric ruthless beasts. It was a miserable sight.

We crowded into the roofless building, sitting on top of each other and stepping on each other's legs as we tried to walk around. As we all took our places, a heavy rain poured down on us, soaking us down to our bones. Our belongings were also soaked, spoiling the food and leaving us with almost nothing to eat for the next two weeks.

This wretched city we were now in, Debrecen, or to be more concise - Debrecen's outskirts. The small building we were in was meant to be a brickyard. Only one tap was available for water, so we had to wait in a long line to drink. The men had to dig a long ,deep ditch to let us take care of our natural human needs. Anyone using it could be seen by all - another one of the many degrading decrees which befell us .

“Walking Tour”

We left this miserable hole Friday morning. A uniformed German SS soldier appeared and called on rabbis and families with four children and more to gather at the center of the yard. Our empty stomachs rumbling, we heard this Nazi bawl out instructions to us. We were about to start a long "walking tour". For many of us, this would be a death march to Auschwitz. I recall that he told us that there is no need to put resistance, as we would not be beaten - he has family too, and he is not a human dog.

Thus, after starving for four days, we commenced our march. German SS guards watched from both sides as we marched in rows of five. None of us tried to escape. We were too depressed, our will power broken down, wholly tormented. We soon arrived at a camp overcrowded with other fellow, desperate Jews, stopped for a while, and then continued the humiliating journey. As Jewish men aged 18-48 were long ago taken to forced labor camps, the marching contingent was composed of young girls, mothers, babies and children, along with many old and sick human souls. Trucks carried our backpacks while we marched for grueling hours in our mournful procession through small towns. The Christian townsfolk stared at us, nobody pouring tears, expressing sympathy our trying to stop the unheard of mass killing of the innocent. I can only recall the name of one town we passed through, Yozsa.

St. George Plains

We arrived one afternoon at a small farm known as Szent Gyorgy Pussta - St. George Plains, where we were accommodated in empty tobacco sheds. The armed Hungarian gendarmes who carefully watched our frightened moves let us walk outside a fixed distance from the sheds during the day. We saw how a heartless gendarme chased away a Jewish child who tried to pick up some food he spotted on the ground.

The weather was beautiful this June afternoon. Ordinarily, an early summer day such as this would elevate my soul and give joy to my body. Soft warmth full of promise. But now all I felt was immense sadness, no joy could penetrate me. At nightfall, we were all herded inside the sheds to lay down on the bare earth. We were cold and hungry, sleep did not come easily.

Another day of beautiful, joyous sunshine came Saturday morning, but not for us on June 25, 1944. By Sunday afternoon we packed our backpacks and prepared to board the nearby train trucks. When we entered the strongly chloroformed boxcars many people became dizzy or fainted. Ninety people crowded into each boxcar, and we were each given half a slice of tasty dark bread and little water, which we quickly consumed. Quite a few people died during this weeklong journey.

Depressing Transport

We were too exhausted to cry about the present or worry about our future. Subconsciously, though, we feared the worst. Indeed, we later found out that our premonitions were well founded. We later found out that not only did the Hungarian government give us away to the Nazis for annihilation, they also paid the full cost of transport to the death camps .

As the Jewish transports did not appear on the regular railway schedule, we were often stranded for hours under the blazing sun waiting for our turn to travel. We received no food or water. People urinated and took care of their natural needs aboard the train, spreading a putrid odor. Small children and babies cried themselves to sleep out of sheer exhaustion, from hunger and thirst, from the wholly wretched situation we were in. Some of the men donned their teffilin and fervently beseeched the Almighty to save us, "look upon your forsaken children, see what the

world is doing to them and send help; pull us out of this catastrophe before it is too late - if it isn't already."

The transport hurtled along mostly at night, rocking us to sleep. We dreamed of freedom, of home, of plentiful food and water. Each time the train stopped, so did our dreams. We sadly woke up to the dreadful reality. During air raids, the cowardly SS guards locked us inside the train, taking cover themselves in bomb shelters.

Our transport stopped one day by the train station, with many Hungarian soldiers and civilians all around. My cousin Magda peeked out of a tiny window at the side of the boxcar and begged a Hungarian officer for a little water. He promptly denied Magda's request. How could anyone be so cruel? Even dangerous criminals condemned to death receive their last request. Why are innocent Jews treated even worse? Is there no more justice left on earth?

My mom and us children resided just beneath a small window, so we saw much breathtaking scenery as the train swiftly raced along. Normally, this would be uplifting, but now we were engulfed by depression.

Our journey reached a turning point on Thursday afternoon, as we left Hungarian territory through the City of Kossa [Kassa?], soon arriving at a nearby small Polish town whose name I do not recall. Our transport was delayed at the station, and another transport with Jews being deported to annihilation centers stood nearby. After a while, our transport's locomotive went to the rear - we were going to travel backwards. We soon went back through the City of Kossa [Kassa?] onto Hungarian soil. At first, we fooled ourselves into believing that the Hungarian government claimed us back, and would not let us be taken to annihilation. It took just a short while, however, for us to face our destiny. Now our transport traveled swiftly. We arrived in the station of Budapest Komarom Estergom, and then to the last Hungarian city on our fateful journey, Hegjeshalom - there we left behind the territory that we mistakenly believed was our homeland.

Some Austrian Kindness

We woke up Friday morning to the sound of the boxcar doors opening, our clothes crumpled from being on our bodies for two weeks now. Spiritually anguished, we dragged ourselves out and discovered that we

had arrived in Austria. Many dead bodies were soon spread out in front of the open boxcars. The Austrian policemen took over this "human cargo". To their credit, they acted much more humanely than the Hungarian policemen did. No bawling or beating us.

I looked around and discovered a nearby road where civilians - free people - occasionally rode through. Together with my thirteen-year-old sister Jolan I walked to the roadside, where Jolan begged passersby for bread. We hardly got there when a young bicycling girl stopped and gave us her own sandwich roll with butter and yellow cheese, which we divided among the five of us. This anonymous Austrian girl's kind gesture satisfied our starved stomach, and made our souls feel good.

Armed gendarmes instructed us to line up in rows of five. We put down our backpacks in the bare field that was our "home" for now and breathed some fresh air. We walked around the area, turning over every little bit of garbage we found in the hope of finding some food. I found some moldy, greenish bread, broke it up into five pieces and shared with my family. Each of us received less than one bite, so we just swallowed it bitterly.

God is Crying for Us

We laid down our starved and tired bodies on the bare earth as dark clouds threatened above us. The clouds soon poured heavy rain upon us. I took this as a sign that God is crying for us. If the whole world keeps quiet and does nothing to help us, at least the faithful Almighty feels for us. The rain poured mercilessly on our bodies as the Sabbath entered on our second deeply sad Friday night.

At daybreak Saturday, the beautiful sun shone brightly in the sky. But we could relate neither to the sun nor to the rain. Our feelings deserted us; nothing penetrated our consciousness.

As we walked about, we discovered some barracks surrounded by barbed-wire fences. In the compound we see fellow Hungarian Jews, including some friends and relatives from Puspokladany. Their transport left Hungary after ours, going straight to the Strasshof concentration camp in Austria. Our transport was on its way to Auschwitz, but by some miracle was turned back from Poland and arrived here in the Strasshof concentration camp.

Degradation at Strasshof

Around noon we were also herded inside the Strasshof camp. We were pleased to at least get wood barracks to live in, and sleep in three-tiered wood plank beds, two persons on each. Our meager food ration included some bread and cooked food apportioned daily. We were able to supplement this for a short while by exchanging nice kerchiefs for a few small slices of dark bread with the Ukrainian girls who worked in the kitchen. For us, it was a real bargain! When the manager discovered this "black market" activity he stopped it immediately.

Walking around the courtyard, a bloodcurdling sight unfolded in front of me. Uncovered corpses were strewn about in and around open ditches. The already deep darkness which engulfed me intensified.

In turn, residents of each barrack took their belongings with them to take a shower and undergo a "procedure". This meant taking all clothes, including the last bit of clothing which covered our bodies, and presenting them by hand to a Ukrainian man. This man took care of disinfecting the clothes while the people strolled around naked inside a special building for a couple of hours. I could not believe that this unheard of, degrading description was true, but when I went to look, I saw with my own eyes that it was really happening. Naked women lined up and handed their packs to the hands of Ukrainian men.

At once I felt the pain of the dreadful shame. Oh, such torment, such a miserable spectacle. I just stood there scared stiff, and like a living dead walked to my place. Then a deafening scream woke me up from my lethargy. I looked in the direction of the hysterical bawling and saw a young woman trying to escape this degradation by choosing death. She was about to hang herself on the outer wall of the barrack building, both her parents lamenting and begging her not to punish them .

Sheer desperation encompassed me. As I stepped inside our barrack the multitude already had their packs on their backs and were starting on their way to the shower for disinfecting. My mother begged me to come with them. "No", I answered her, "I am just unable to go."

The place soon emptied completely, save for me. Still scared stiff in my dark desperation, I leaned against the wall. A young Ukrainian beast shortly appeared, yelling at me to come. "No, I am not going anywhere," I

daringly answered. His expression grew angry as he lifted his hand and beat my back with his whip. My mind darkened, my soul deeply injured .

Unable to think, my two legs dragged me to the shower place, where I joined my mother. All of us women stood in line, naked, and handed over all our belongings to a Ukrainian man. Then the real torture began. We were herded from room to room and questioned about many different things, then underwent medical examinations. Then a young male shaved all our body hairs. Oh, how can the earth tolerate so many cruel deeds? Our senses were totally numbed by so many different shocking events. I could not comprehend anything and was paralyzed.

Afterwards we took showers, about fifty women together in one room where the stream of water from above started and stopped without our being able to control it. We were all photographed and received dark blue sheets to cover our bodies. Then we got our clothes back and got dressed.

Hanging In as Slave Laborers

We were divided into two groups. Ours became the forced slave laborers of the twentieth century. The other group, however, was the unlucky one. It consisted of people unfit to work, either because of age or poor health, but mainly young mothers who had more than two babies with them. Empty boxcars stood ready to ship these miserable saints without delay to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. There, the innocent, defenseless human cargo perished within minutes - their tormented souls returned to their Creator, their remains herded to the crematorium and burned to ashes. The pure souls parted from the bodies through the crematorium chimney in the form of dark gray smoke, on their way to the heavenly tribunal.

Our group boarded boxcars at the same time as the less fortunate group. With deep pain, I can still recall seeing a former neighbor of ours, Mrs. Stern - along with her four young children - board the Auschwitz-bound boxcars. She saw no one except for her young ones. Her eyes reflected the oncoming death. After the war, she and her children never came back, like so many others from our home town, and from so many other cities and countries.

Our transport got moving, stopping after a while at a small Austrian town. Here, each of us received a hot meal consisting of mashed potatoes and spinach, compliments of the local mayor. It was a very nice gesture.

Later we arrived in Vienna, where we left the boxcars and walked through some of the city's long streets, our packs on our backs and in our hands. As usual, armed guards escorted us. I recall being taken over by a terrible sense of humiliation when masses of civilians peered at our column. Looking back, it was they who should have felt the shame, and not me.

I did not feel the time passing. We boarded regular trains and arrived at our destination Friday morning. It was the railroad station of Ober Hollabrun. The gendarmes escorted us to a red-faced landowner in his fifties. His handsome helper, a Russian prisoner of war named Stefan, had dark hair and a white face. We walked not too far to a farm between the towns of Ober Hollabrun and Ober Fellabrun, as a horse cart carried our packs.

Along the road stood a simple white house consisting of a small kitchen with a built-in-stove, and a bigger living room. Straw mattresses and rugs covered the bare earth floor. This house served as sleeping quarters for three families with twenty-one souls ,who received some light blankets. The fourth family, my aunt and her four children, occupied a very narrow storeroom.

Our first day of work turned out to be our Holy Sabbath Day. Sure enough, a sad beginning. Sigfried Sedlar, the farm owner, paid the Nazi authorities some amount in order to use us, but we received no payment, only a meager food supply. We performed strenuous farm work from sunrise to sunset for the duration of our stay, all summer and fall. Sunday became our day of rest. Our captors treated us inhumanely, hitting us on any special occasion they found.

We kept track of our holy days, the Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur. The landowner, Sigfried Sedlar, permitted us to celebrate them. We prayed to the Almighty even more fervently than ever, hoping to be rescued soon - to be free human beings with all our loved ones.

BERGEN-BELSEN

November, 1944: Concentration Camp Shipment

Towards the end of October, we were served a one-day notice to prepare ourselves for a journey. The destination - concentration death camps. The first station for us four families was Strasshof, where several thousands of our fellow Jewish slave laborers gathered. After a few days we were again herded into boxcars ready for shipment. The date may have been the first or second of November, 1944 .

This was a very dark era in the history of mankind, when a group of beings who called themselves humans perpetrated such unheard of evil deeds against millions of innocent, defenseless people. With incomprehensible brutality they exterminated their victims .And why? Because we belonged to the Jewish faith, the religion of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses - the Prophets whose holy tenets were accepted by almost half the world. The Jewish people gave mankind its most precious book, the Bible. Yet Nazi Germany sentenced us to annihilation, the spark of hatred mercilessly spreading the fire of death.

The boxcar with its human cargo was advancing from Austria through Czechoslovakia in the direction of Berlin, Germany. The human cargo consisted of the Jewish slave-laborers of the twentieth century, stripped of all their human rights, banished from their country of birth by the government, mercilessly thrown to the clutches of Nazi Germany in order to be annihilated. We sat crammed on the naked floor, asking no questions as to our pending destruction. It was pitch dark at night. Under the influence of months of agony we lost our own free will, and just accepted the treacherous instructions and followed the perilous hands wherever they took us. Our minds were in a state of terror then, with the effects lingering long after.

Ten Minutes in Berlin

About ninety souls sat in the boxcar, including my mother, sister and two brothers. Suddenly we heard a noise from outside and saw some rays of light filtering in. The transport came to a halt. The doors were unlatched and an armed Nazi guards informed us that we had ten minutes to take care of our natural needs at the beautiful park next to the Berlin railroad

station. What an awful site - a multitude of males and females squatting side-by-side.

Deeply embarrassed, we received a meager amount of dark bread and stinky, moldy cheese as we returned to the boxcars. Then the doors were again locked as each of us took their place. My dear mother suggested that we save the meager food rations for better times, when we are working again. As we were just sitting now, there is no need to eat. We had already been traveling for three days by now, the hunger and thirst bringing us to a faint condition. Acting out of a combination of light-mindedness and respect, we accepted my mother's advice. She neatly packed all the rations into our backpacks - for better times - she mistakenly thought. Then we yearningly looked around and saw how everyone relished their food while we kept silent and heard our empty stomachs rumble dissatisfaction.

Bergen-Celle

Thus our journey continued, coming to a stop after an unknown amount of time. We dragged ourselves out of the boxcars as the doors were unlatched, the Nazi guard roaring out orders. We had to line up in fives at our destination, the Bergen Celle train station, a slow and steady rainfall welcoming us.

Since we were chased out of our former homes, dark skies and steady rain greeted us at each new location. Such a marvelous sensation this phenomenon gave me. I was overcome with a special feeling that somehow even managed to uplift my darkened spirit. It came to me as a message from the heavens, which were venting their anger. The Almighty shares in our tragedy and is pouring tears of sorrow. He is crying on our behalf. These thoughts planted seeds of hope and faith into my soul against the backdrop of the great catastrophe.

I had lost all faith in mankind when we were banished from our home. First, because of the devilish brains that devised the plans to exterminate innocent souls. Second, because of those who executed the satanic decree. And third, because of the outside world - those nations which did nothing to stop Hitler's atrocities at the very beginning. By keeping silent, they, too, carry the burden of the crime.

Lined up in rows of five, we set out on our sad march. Army trucks delivered our backpacks. Swab German SS Nazi soldiers escorted us. The group I was in consisted mainly of women and children, some old people and a few young ones. Men aged 18 to 48 were taken to forced army labor several years before, where most had perished from starvation, from inhuman beatings, or from freezing to death in sub-zero weather.

Our group marched in the middle of the road, with a few stone houses to our left, curious eyes staring at us from the windows. I felt deep humiliation, but the people who should have felt the shame were those staring at us from the houses. We were innocent, defenseless people; they were partners in the annihilation of millions of innocent souls.

Marching to Bergen-Belsen

As our march continued, a big red stone school building stood out on our right. But now, it housed uniformed Hungarian soldiers. They, too, just stared at our unfortunate group. I soon discovered that some of the Nazi soldiers escorting us also spoke Hungarian, and gathered up enough courage to ask one of them where we were going and what sort of work we would have to do. Quite some time elapsed before he thought of what to say, but when his answer finally came it sounded disastrous. He told us the blunt fact that we were marching into a death camp. Then he said something like, "I really cannot understand those Germans; within two months they exterminated twenty thousand Russian prisoners of war."

How much desperation can a person overcome? What is more agonizing - starvation or the constant fear of death? Now I had to deal with both. Within my dark and hopeless world, I plodded along until I saw a high barbed-wire fence with the words "Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp" inscribed atop the heavy stone gate. Reading just those four words made my blood freeze in my veins. I did not have the courage to check if there were more words written - there probably were, but I was not interested in reading them. The only thing I was interested in before entering Bergen-Belsen was how to get out of it!

Sentry boxes marked each side of the gate, which was guarded by two armed German SS Nazis. I was scared stiff. With a feeling of great torment I entered the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, or more correctly, death factory. Bergen-Belsen's condemned residents perished

mainly from systematic starvation, or from machine-gun bullets. The ever-burning crematoria served to get rid of the thousands of corpses while belching clouds of dark, noxious smoke into the sky.

The camp consisted of many separate blocks, with residents of one block prohibited from speaking with residents of another block, and each block locked. Each block housed people of a certain nationality, or people grouped together for other reasons such as the type of punishment they were to be inflicted with. Several kitchens were spread out throughout the camp, each serving a couple of blocks. A huge pine forest encircled Bergen-Belsen. A slow and steady rain continued to fall as our group of over fifteen thousand was herded into Block 10. We stood outside, starving, for many hours.

“No One Comes to Work Here, Only to Die”

I met someone who had been in Bergen-Belsen for some time, and asked him - like I asked the Hungarian-speaking guard - what sort of work we would be doing here. He looked at me flabbergasted and coldly answered that no one comes to work at Bergen-Belsen, everybody comes here to die. I never saw this person again, his blunt answer only intensifying my already overflowing desperation. Unceasing tears rolled down my face for days.

After several more exhausting hours standing outside, we were at last allowed to move inside the barracks of Block 10. Our building was next to the gate. A high barbed-wire fence separated us from a group of Jews from Holland in a different block. Inside the barracks, over 200 people took up their abode on three-tiered bunk beds.

The suffering of body and soul further numbed our brains. From being the slave prisoners of the twentieth century, we turned into the living dead of the twentieth century. We turned into objects to the will of others, like robots. We choked in pain. This condition penetrated my soul for years to come, impeding my feelings.

Each bunk bed in our concentration camp served two grown-ups - as living quarters and as sleeping place. They had straw-filled mattress and one blanket on them. Between the rows of bunk beds was a very narrow space for traffic. So crammed in were we, that despite the harsh cold, it felt warm.

Block Ten's Five Camp Commandments

The leader of the whole block, a Jewish bastard named Simon Fisher from the Hungarian city of Szeged, received his orders from the Nazi SS bastard Kremer. In turn, Fisher passed on the Nazi instructions to every barrack leader. Ours was a nice fellow by the name of Vamosh. Some of his helpers - Nushi, Vera and Mury.

As we all settled down in our abode, Mr. Vamosh had a most important, but ill-boding, message for us from the Nazi SS headquarters. He pitilessly put all his wrath into this speech. Full of anger, he shouted his words almost as if he was speaking to a bunch of criminals:

Here in the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, death peaks out from every corner, threatening to take possession of us all. Some of these threats:

- We must take care of cleanliness; if we become infected with lice, the Germans will burn our barrack with all of us inside. The Germans already did this in the past.
- No one is allowed to steal cattle-beets - anyone who does so will be shot to death.
- We are forbidden to walk close to the outer barbed-wire fence - any one seen close to it pays with his life. Anyhow, the outer fence is electrified - a light touch of it is deadly.
- Some of sooner, some of us later - but in time - each and every one of us will go through the chimney of the crematorium (located at the near end of the camp) in the form of swirling grayish smoke clouds, and will arrive before the heavenly court.
- One more warning: to steal bread, between us inmates, is strictly forbidden. The punishment for bread stealing: to walk in the courtyard with a shaming inscription that reads - "I stole bread" written on a wide-carton hanging on top of one's breast. As just punishment this was accepted by all.

Trying to Overcome Depression

As we searched for the spare bread and stinky yellow cheese that we took with us, we noticed that our delivered belongings were missing. So

was my personal diary and pen. As my mother planned to save the spare bread for the time we would again be working, we could not complain. Still, we were quite dismayed at not eating it in the cattle trucks, as our health weakened considerably.

Since being "enlightened" as to our destiny at Bergen-Belsen - unceasing tears covered my eyes for days. With such an appearance, I ran into a former classmate of mine, Hilda. With an astonished look on her face, she stared at me, then keenly, took interest in my embittered sentiment. After hearing me out, she comforted me with a kind smiling face. "No, Irene," she said. "You will see the time will come. We will survive, outlive the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. We are definitely not going to perish here. Be patient and, sure enough, freedom will be ours again. Just put your trust in the Almighty as always. He is our ever-ready guardian angel".

I gave careful consideration to my friend Hilda's words. Maybe she is right... Then each of us went her own way. She lived in a different barrack with her family. During our six month stay at Bergen-Belsen, we only met on two other occasions. Hilda's words of comfort, with the bromide drug mixed in our food, worked miraculously to stop my flowing tears.

Daily, we had to stand wearisome hours outside to be counted during roll calls. The sick, weak, old, small children - in rain, snow, storm or piercing cold. On each occasion, the wood-headed SS Nazi soldier counted us over and over again. Their being just a short distance away, a gripping fear always seized me. This was true all the more so when I sometimes had to bear witness to the cruelty of our own fellow Jew - a barrack leader, Mr. Torok, from Szeged. He could slap an old, bawling, sickly woman for not standing upright.

Just a few days after arriving in Bergen-Belsen, in the evening, I walked into our barrack and noticed a fine young gentleman, Mr. Beck, muttering to himself: "This unhappy existence, I can bear it no longer. I felt very sorry for him. He could have been around the age of fifty, and had no family members with him there - so, I had to remember him. This memory serves as his tombstone. The following morning, at early dawn, I walked near Mr. Beck's bunk bed. Just then, some people were carrying Mr. Beck's lifeless, rigid corpse to be burnt at the crematorium. Mr. Beck's unjust, unfair early death was just one of the innumerable daily deaths

here. In Bergen Belsen, death took its victims without distinction from any age.

The Barracks

Soon enough, we discovered a swarm of lice on our mattresses. In fact, the whole barrack was swarming with lice. The next morning, we threw out our lice-ridden mattresses, at my mom's suggestion. We were amazed to see that other inmates picked up our lice-ridden mattresses. For some people, comfort was more important than hygiene and health. Sure enough, in Bergen-Belsen, no one escaped louse completely. But still, it made a big difference if they were swarming on you, or if you just had a few dozen on your clothing .

Thus, through those six months, my mom, my sister, my two brothers and I laid on the bare wood. Sleep? I do not remember that at all. Who could sleep under constant starving, with a rumbling stomach? Growing thin to skin and bone. Each time turning over on the bare wood planks, our bones creaking, our bodies in pain.

Each barrack building had one huge chamber for the bathroom, to be used by everybody - that is, over two thousand people. Sometimes there were water shortages. Located in the center of the room was a very long metal sink with about thirty or forty shower heads on each side. Females, males, using it at the same time - people had no shame any more. Men and women stood half or fully naked opposite each other or side by side. I could not participate in this degrading and shameful nakedness before an audience. I decided to come the next day, very early, around four o'clock in the morning, hoping to find the place empty. But, to my great disappointment, there were already others - men and women - washing their naked bodies. I became very sad, then I looked around and noticed something horrible - many dead bodies on the cement floor. Frightened away completely from this washroom, I immediately decided to never again step inside this "funeral home". I kept faithful to that decision, and never again stepped over its threshold !

Still, almost every day, I washed my whole body. We kept with us, from home, a bowl and soap. All five of us never drank our black "coffee" portion. In reality, it was not at all regular black coffee. It was more so a dirty liquid mixed with a drug, bromide. So the black "coffee" portion given to the five of us - I used for bathing. Even washed in it my beautiful blond

hair. Near our abode was a dark corner where I bathed daily without being disturbed by an audience .

We made our natural needs in a so called latrine near the outer barbed-wire fence. All around us stood guards in watchtowers. Each had a machine gun, with the guards ready to shoot at the slightest suspicious movements. These movements consisted mainly of picking up cattle beets.

Thinking of Food

As far as I know, no one ever tried to escape from the Bergen Belsen concentration camp. We inmates were in a hypnotized, brainwashed, living-dead condition. In our restricted, dark world, the most we could think of was food.

A normal lifestyle? To think freely with a longing to live? At this stage of our existence none of this penetrated our minds. This was the natural outcome our being oppressed and persecuted, going about in constant starvation, in the shadow of death, adjacent to a crematorium, under the influence of the bromide drug mixed in our food.

Even the meager provision given to us by the Nazis became much less after passing through the hands of the Jewish barrack leaders, who tithed the portions! Our own Jewish leaders walked about in their tight-fitting clothes on their fleshy bodies, while the nonentity poor population, skin-to-the-bone thin, had clothing just hanging on loosely.

Breakfast? We never had any. As for our lunch, a few tiny pieces of cooked cattle beets swimming in a dirty liquid, mixed with bromide, distributed to us almost every day - but never at the same hour. In fact, any hour during a circle of one day, but never within the twenty-four period, always later. One day it may have been ten in the morning. The next day, two in the afternoon, then a day and a half later at midnight or maybe three in the morning. Very seldom we received a liquid cooked in breadcrumbs instead of "black-coffee."

We received dark bread which also had bromide mixed in. Our bread portion came to one full slice per day, if only they would give it to us on time each day. When we received our ration, our leaders told us that it

would have to last for three days. Usually ,however, more than three days elapsed before we received our next ration.

Another problem with this system was that living in starvation, not everyone could control their rumbling stomach, and some would eat up their "three-day" portion the moment they received it. Then it was very terrible for them to wait till the next bread distribution.

In addition, a few people would go from one barrack to another trying to trade their meager bread-portion for a cigarette. On two different occasions, the Nazis distributed four cigarettes to inmates from the age 21 and up. Unfortunately those desperate to smoke cigarettes found some heartless folks ready to exchange their cigarette for bread.

Craving Cattle Beets

Some lucky inmates worked in the big kitchen premises, but were watched carefully by armed Nazi guards standing behind them. When the big gate opened, food carriers brought our "d'orge-mu'se" lunch in huge pots. The gate remained open when the food carriers returned the empty pots. With the Nazis keeping a watchful eye, no one "picked up" forbidden cattle-beets or any other kind of raw vegetable from the kitchen.

With hungry eyes, I watched those food carriers eating their stolen cattle-beets. So I begged my brother Bela, who was a food carrier, to bring us some cattle beets too. Sure enough, he brought us a nice fresh piece of raw cattle-beets the next day. But before I had a chance to enjoy a few bites, together with my sister and brother Bandi, my dear mother came over and yelled out of fear at my brother Bela, demanding that he get rid of the cattle-beets right away. And so he did, by putting them down inside the cement washroom floor. I was very disappointed, stiffened from anger - how could my mother do this? But she was simply that we would be shot for stealing cattle-beets from the kitchen! All the while, some lucky people around us heartily ate their stolen cattle-beets.

I then decided to handle things myself, whatever little chance there may be. I would have to look out very carefully, avoiding being noticed by the SS Nazi guards waiting for a chance to shoot me to death. For hours, I would walk outside the courtyard, waiting for a chance to get something to eat. On one occasion, I noticed some inmate girls digging out cattle-beets and throwing them to a begging multitude of people. These brave

girls withstood the cruel lashes of the kapo hitting them again and again, and threw the life-saving cattle-beets over the barbed-wire fence. As the beets flew over to our side of the fence, all of us rushed to catch them. I must say, there was no fighting. Whoever was lucky enough to catch a cattle-beet took it and had to disappear, so as to give others a chance. But this soon ended too, and we had to look for other ways to appease our perpetual hunger.

Early one day, just after roll call, all of us were escorted by the Nazi guards to take a shower. They took us past block ten, by the left side of the gate - on the other side, freedom. Oh, how I longed to walk out, to be free, to escape the dark horror of Bergen-Belsen! Now my rumbling stomach demanded food. The scant food provision given to us by the German authorities served to slowly and systematically lead us to perish from starvation.

I found a trifling new source to obtain some food. I volunteered to return empty cans to the kitchen instead of my brother, Bela. But rarely did I have any luck. The SS guard, with his gun ready to shoot, always stood by. I remember two lucky occasions when I did manage to get food. Once, a girl sat beside a huge pot cleaning small carrots - provisions for the SS gang - with the guard next to her. I just stared at this girl with my hungry, begging eyes; she, too, gave an agreeable look and allowed me to grab a few small carrots from the pot. I dared not put my hand back a second time. The other time, I was lucky enough to grab a few pieces of very small red beets. Both times, I shared the treasure not only with my own family of five, but also with a "neighbor". I remember his name - Mr. Gorog. He was a fine young man who was later sent to another barrack, and we never saw him again.

When I say a neighbor in Bergen-Belsen, that could mean either twenty centimeters away from our abode - our bunk beds - or someone separated just by a wooden plank about twenty centimeters high.

Rarely, we found in our "dorge-muse" liquid tiny pieces of white meat - some dared to say it was human meat, because it was unimaginable that the Nazis would feed us with any other, "normal", kind of meat.

December, 1944: New Faces

On the 7th of December 1944, new faces appeared in our barrack: women from the ghettos of Budapest, and men from all over Hungary - mostly forced army laborers. This, even though the Russian army was fighting around Hungary. The German army authorities, with help from the Hungarian government, took these unfortunate Jews straight to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, or should I say death factory. Some people from our group happily proclaimed that they found close family members. I told my mom, as I went outside, that perhaps we'd find a family member of ours too. My mom just looked on very seriously and sadly.

As the multitude of people gathered around the courtyard, I took my place at the side of the big open gate. I carefully searched the face of each and every new person arriving. After some time, as no familiar face showed up, my enthusiasm flagged. Then, I did see a familiar face. I had not seen him for several years. He was a former schoolmate, and for a few minutes we even both felt glad to meet; then we became very sad and he went on his way to seek lodging .

Dating Habits

I just stood there, sad for not having found any members of our family. Suddenly, one newcomer, a fine, good looking young man stood opposite me without any formalities and started questioning me about camp life. It went on for a good while; before going on his way he asked me for a date for the morrow. We decided that our rendezvous would be at the corner of the latrine .

A few days later, my friend Hilda, came to meet me escorted by a nice, good looking young man. She intended to introduce this young man to me. His parents were good friends of my own parents. My Mom was really glad to meet him, and later declared to me that his parents are very rich, and that she will marry me off to this boy. At that point, I told my mom that she would not, because I am definitely not going to marry this rich boy.

For a short period I dated the first young man, whom I will refer to as "blonde". The rich boy, I will refer to as "brown". Both had nice, blue-grayish eyes. The rich brown boy also asked to meet me, but I refused.

Anyhow, he also found his way to approach my company. I never gave him much time; after a few words I would tell him goodbye. No begging of his would change my mind.

During their first days in Bergen-Belsen, the spoiled women from Budapest found the "dorge - muse" uneatable. They all dumped their portion inside the washroom basin. Soon the Nazi officials found out and revoked the distribution for two days - not just for the spoiled ladies from Budapest, but for our whole block, block ten. We were all outraged. Having already been thirty days in the concentration camp, and suffering from constant starvation, going two days entirely without food weakened our entire system.

I continued to meet my blonde acquaintance for a while - every day at 4 p.m. at the corner of the latrine. We usually walked around the courtyard, and on rare occasions when the weather was extremely cold or stormy, we stayed inside my family's barrack. Sometimes he would sing - he had a very pleasant voice. The conversation between the two of us by and large revolved around the cruel fate of our loved ones - our people - and ourselves. He worried deeply, imagining that members of his family had already perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. I tried to comfort him, encourage and induce him to hope for the best - to bear an unbearable existence for a little longer .

Making matters worse was the bromide drug and its unavoidable effects. Every one of us became despondent to some degree. My blonde acquaintance lost his desire to sing. I lost interest to converse with him - or anyone else for that matter. None of his begging would change my mind, as he searched for me in vain. I tried to avoid him, but when he occasionally found me and asked me what happened, I simply told him the truth - I am too desperate to talk to anybody.

Food Stories

Like many others in our block, I had a daily routine. After roll call, I would just loaf around the camp for many hours among the multitude of people. One day, my attention was grabbed by the site of an old, respectable lady hanging a large piece of cardboard from her large body with the words "I STOLE BREAD" (kenyeret loptam) written on it. It was a shameful advertisement, but at least all she had to do was walk her allotted time as

punishment for stealing bread from another starving inmate. She walked with her head bowed down, not looking, and not seeing anyone.

On 25 December 1944, our "delicious" lunch consisted of some green leaves mixed with potato skins. All over the world these skins are thrown into the garbage can or given - when cooked - to pigs. But I must say that this was the only time we felt we were eating something good and tasty.

To the best of my knowledge, none of us women inmates had their monthly period in Bergen-Belsen, except for - as gossiping tongues rumored - one "special" madam. She served as a whore to one of the SS Nazi officers. In exchange for her generosity, the officer gave her and two of her close family members the same food as the SS soldiers. This woman looked healthy and strong, like a stuffed pig. For obvious reasons, I am not writing her name.

With the conditions we lived in, moral, decent behavior reigned. Very few acted shamelessly and indecently, but I do recall one instance that actually took place before the eyes of hundreds of witnesses. Daily, a young female would shamelessly climb up to her boyfriend's bunk bed, with the barrack still flooded with light. The two lay entangled underneath their lice-ridden covers making their obscene, degrading act of sex. In those days, the decent majority did not accept sex for unmarried couples .

One day my attention was attracted by a young mother who asked her mother to feed her three or four year old daughter, as she had no patience to do so herself and wished to go for a walk. More than happily, the starving grandmother accepted the task of feeding this small child. It was close to my own bunk bed, so I could hear and see it: "Juditka (that was the child's name) put it in my mouth!" One piece went in the mouth of the grandmother and one piece to the mouth of Juditka. Who could blame Juditka's grandmother? At least she survived too .

That's Entertainment

On the night of 31 December 1944, some young people organized a Sylvester night happening, but all it included was singing sensitive songs. These sadly reminded us of our past world of freedom to which we longed.

Later, some actors, singers and musicians joined our block in Bergen-Belsen. Once a week, they would act, sing and play a "Hajdu Peter" harmonica. A cantor named Benedek (whose first name I do not recall) would sing religious songs. These performers would receive an additional portion of dorge-muse as payment for their act.

Red Cross Package Brings Hope

In the early days of February 1945, in the middle of the dark night, we - over 15,000 inmates - were rushed out of the barracks half asleep, in the cruelest cold and stormy weather. We had to stand for roll calls lined up five in a row in soldierly order. For long, wearying hours, we stood in one place without moving, like living dead, starved out and frozen to the spot. Daybreak found us in this exhausted state. But no SS Nazi soldier came to count our group. Finally, at eight o'clock in the morning, we were ordered to be ready with our belongings in five minutes, as we would be moving out of block ten .

A little before this happened, a Red Cross delegation from Switzerland reviewed our group during a roll call. They did not talk to us, and we dared not even think of talking to them. The fear of SS Nazi soldiers paralyzed us long ago.

Shortly after this visit, members our block received a Red Cross package, sent, we were told, by generous American people - may the Almighty bless them. The package itself contained a small amount of biscuits, margarine and a canned meat; since my family members were not sure the meat was kosher, we exchanged it for margarine. We quickly consumed our Red Cross food package, which sure made sense to our constantly rumbling stomach. But what made us feel even better was the knowledge that we are remembered by some. We are not entirely forgotten by all! This Red Cross package accounted for a good human feeling in our soul. For a short while, we felt a tiny seed, a spark of new hope in our souls and hearts.

One day, each family was given a plain white postcard. We were instructed to write on them only that we are in good health and address them to someone in our former hometown. We sent it to a nice Christian family, and they did receive it (as we later found out),

Our Quarters

Our group of over 15,000 also included a group of Polish Jewish whose barracks were somewhat separated from ours, at the rear of block ten. After a short while, this multitude arrived at block thirty-six. Here, too, the Polish Jews moved to the rear of the block. This block was surrounded with a barbed-wire fence, but it was open to a bigger courtyard. The barracks of block thirty-six were more dilapidated than our previous quarters .

We were herded into smaller and darker three-tiered bunk beds. My mom and us four children were again placed on the third tier - our nearest neighbor was a woman with three children. Two of them were her own teenage children, and the third was a younger boy whose parents had already been executed by the German Nazis. They were Jews from Yugoslavia. Her sixteen-year-old teenage girl would sometimes sing beautiful sensitive, songs. Our other very close neighbor was the Meisels family from Nadudvar - friends of my parents. This family was composed of grandma Meisels, her daughter-in-law and three boys - her grandsons. Her son, the father of these grandchildren, was taken to forced army labor.

This barrack, too, was fully lice-ridden. Each morning, before getting dressed, we would check for and destroy whatever lice we could find - mostly around our shirt collars. After dressing, my elder brother Bela and I would take our coverlet plaids to the courtyard each and every day, where we would shake out as much lice as would fall. But we never really managed to get rid of them completely.

Then I would go to the outside latrine - also located at the rear of our block - and sit for quite some time on one of the free holes. There, or while walking among the multitude in the courtyard, I would eavesdrop on conversations and try to hear the latest false reports. On those false reports, we built up our false hopes! That helped us stay alive and bear the unbearable! Those false reports said we would go to Switzerland and the Nazis would exchange us for whatever they could - money, medicine or army trucks. In turn, I too would spread those false rumors to my fellow barrack dwellers - and give them some false hope to hang on to.

As was the case in block ten, in block thirty-six we were separated by a barbed wire fence from Dutch Jewish people who resided at the other

side of our courtyard. Somewhat further down was the crematoria, ever belching out putrid clouds of smoke.

One-Way Hospital Visits

Shortly after arriving in our new location the barrack doctor announced that we are all entitled to volunteer to be sent to the hospital, where we would receive plenty of good food. The doctor himself escorted those unfortunate people who volunteered to the hospital - no one ever saw those helpless creatures again. In fact within twenty-four hours after escorting them to the hospital, the doctor himself declared loudly to the whole barrack about their deaths. This should have served as a warning not to volunteer, but in spite of this, people still did volunteer and went to their death. Years later I heard that the doctors and their families ate the better food designated for the sick .

Walking Corpses

One of the following days, all of us were escorted to the bathhouse, as usual with armed SS guards at our sides. Being in a death camp for a long time, one learns to live with the sight of the many corpses, but it will always be a sight of dread and horror .Nothing, however, could describe the sight that unfolded as we marched down this day. It was so horrific, incomprehensible to the human mind and a heart-piercing spectacle to human sense. That was how I felt anyhow.

Looking at their direction, one could see in the courtyard of block ten a multitude of creatures that looked more like skeletons than human beings. They looked like animated corpses. Some just stood about, while others collapsed and then wallowed in the mud and in their own filth. As we advanced, I noticed that a giant hill had just risen in front of the latrine at the rear of block ten. This gigantic hill was made of the skeleton corpses - the former bodies of inmates - mostly Jews - males that were transferred to Bergen-Belsen from the other main concentration camps (like Dachau) in their skeleton-like condition. They were brought here because Bergen-Belsen had a working crematorium with which the Nazis could get rid of the Jewish corpses as quickly as possible. Those early deaths resulted from inhuman treatment by the German Nazis.

After this heart-rending sight, we marched back gloomily to the barrack with our heads bowed down. I was so overtaken with sadness that I forgot

to glance over the big gate and yearn for the free world that existed on the other side.

Some time later, still in block thirty-six, we again received a small Red Cross package, now from the kind and generous Swedish people - God bless them too. Its contents were some tasty biscuits and margarine. We heartily consumed the package as soon as we received it, experiencing a human feeling through our stomach .

A Monstrous Scream

One particularly gloomy morning after I just settled down on my three-story bunk bed, a monstrous scream suddenly reached my ear. Hypnotized, I left my place, my legs carrying me in the direction of the monstrous scream which came from the other side of the road. Two high barbed-wire fences separated me from this event. As my glance fell on the sight, I stood rooted to the spot. I had to witness one of the many brutal atrocities that Germany perpetrated against innocent, defenseless human being. The monstrous scream came from an unfortunate Jewish inmate girl's throat, heart and soul. Opposite this screaming girl stood two brutal wild beasts - armed SS Nazi German soldiers. A third wild beast was also present, a German shepherd dog the size of a small calf. The SS soldiers unceasingly roused the dog to jump on the girl and tear off her flesh. I do not recall how long I stood there looking at this blood-curdling sight, but it left a deep impression on me, and a sad effect for years to come.

Less Food, More Poison

Since moving to block thirty-six, roll calls were almost completely omitted, and bread distribution was postponed to longer and longer periods. Before, as we received our portion on time (almost), we could divide it so that it would last until the next bread distribution. Meager as it was, we at least had something to put in our stomach each day. Also, we received our portion at random times, not once every twenty-four hours between the distribution of dorge-muse. We would sit and wait from morning till three o'clock in the early morning the following day, when our dorge-muse lunch finally arrived at our barrack. With all of us half fainted from starvation, we received this "hearty" lunch which contained only a few small pieces of cooked cattle-beets swimming in a dirty liquid mixed with bromide.

This period beginning February 1945 till our liberation was the most dreadful for us. Our unbearable conditions worsened by the hour - by the minute - with bread distribution never on time. The Nazi authorities excuse: the allies were dropping bombs on Hanover, at the bakery which produced our bread.

It was during this period of harshest starvation that the barrack doctor distributed some gray powder in a small jar to us. He instructed us to lick this stuff, which contained "vitamins" in place of the bread and dorge-muse which we are not receiving on time - or at all. Only once I licked this so-called vitamin, but never again. I felt very weak from it. I thought I was going to die soon. I was overcome by a sensation of almost a total darkness. I felt my life hanging only on a hairbreadth. Never before did I experience such a strange fear of death.

All I could think was asking the Almighty for help. Without a sound, but with all my soul and the last drop of my will power, I prayed, begged and promised: "Oh, my Mighty Kind Creator, please help me to stay alive, to walk out alive from this death factory. As before, and even more, I will try to abide by our holy Bible teachings".

The Strength to Survive

We heard air raid alerts and air raid attacks more frequently those months. We knew this meant that Nazi Germany is heading for disaster, approaching its downfall and defeat - an end to its barbaric and murderous reign.

This served us as a glimmer of hope in the midst of a desolate and unhappy existence - a prospect of nearing freedom. Oh, how much we needed to witness, to know about those air raids for our survival. So many perished already from starvation and inhuman treatment. Our existence did not subsist on the inferior provisions that the German Nazis more often than not did not even distribute to us. Our survival depended more so on false rumors, the inspiring air attacks, and our deep faith in the Almighty.

In those passing days, I would "take my post" for long hours, in anticipation of the air attacks. No rain, no snow or storm could divert me from my routine in my utter despair. Every single day, I would faithfully

gaze, in a hypnotized condition. From my observation post, I discovered a great source of cattle-beets one of those gray raining days. Just over the fence, at the far side of the road, there was a hill. Its mixture of black cinder and straw covered a large quantity of frozen cattle-beets. Since spotting it, my eyes craved it. Staring long hours at this source of food, I felt I became one with it, longing to reach out and take a few with me.

The distance to the hill of cattle-beets, located by the barbed wire fence, was not far. The problem was how to get there alive, grab a few cattle-beets, and come back alive to enjoy the results of my daring action! This food source stood in a different direction from the kitchen. I thought about walking there and grabbing a few cattle-beets when taking the empty dorge-muse dish back to the kitchen. But this was unthinkable, as the way leading from our gate to the kitchen was almost in the opposite direction. The guard in the watchtower was ready every minute to shoot to death anyone who took a step in the wrong direction. Only eight meters from the kitchen, but no chance to fill my famished stomach with those longed-for cattle-beets. In spite of this hopeless and bleak situation, I dreamed night and day that one day - yes I would - I must - reach over there alive to have a few of those cattle-beets and get back alive to my three-tiered bunk bed. But in the meantime, I just faithfully took my stand sending sad yearning looks over to the cattle-beet hill .

During those endless hours behind the barbed wire fence, other much more heart-rending occurrences attracted my attention. While I stood there without a break, enormous army trucks were filled up to full capacity with skeleton corpses. To where were they hauled? To the crematoria to be burned. In between there were also many naked skeleton bodies transferred by cart. But instead of two strong horses, these horse-carts were pulled and pushed - or rather lugged - by four unfortunate skeletal "living-dead" creatures, in a decaying condition themselves. They hardly dragged themselves along, all four of them propped against the four-wheels of the horse-cart while an armed SS German Nazi guard walked at their side.

As I focused on these inconceivably cruel treatments, one of the skeletal creatures halted. The SS Nazi guard kicked him with his heavy boots on his shinbone. Helplessly, I watched the aftermath, worrying that within a minute or two, the poor fellow would drop dead. But no - the unbelievable happened. The unfortunate skeletal slave pulled along as he leaned against the moving horse cartwheel.

Bread After Two Weeks

After two weeks had passed since our last bread distribution, finally, one day in the late evening, the big moment we were impatiently waiting for came. Our lifesaver arrived - the bread. We were all so feeble and our very existence was a miracle. Our barrack leader distributed the bread from his living space - at the far end from us. We were hardly able to hold out, waiting our turn to hold this eagerly awaited bread.

From my third story bunk bed, I am looking to see when our turn will arrive. Now, as we are only one row behind, I can see one of the Rudolf brothers happily hurrying with bread in his hand. Just as he turned, a rain of urine sprinkled from above, straight on his dear bread. A twelve-year-old boy, one of our neighbors, finished urinating into a can. He intended to hang the can on a nail, but missed it. Thus, the whole can full of fresh urine spilled out. Mr. Rudolf stood stunned, stared upwards and then asked who did it. Death-like silence reigned for some moments. I would not turn in this poor orphan boy, nor would his relative, who also saw what happened. Soon, the guilty party plucked up enough courage and apologized - and that was the end of this episode.

Some of the inmates became so low-spirited that they ate from the same dish they used for urinating and defecation. Oh, how could they? It was disgusting even to look at it .

Barrack Leader's Cruelty

One of those dull gray evenings, a certain Mrs. Torok (whose stepson also fell sacrifice as a volunteer going to the hospital in order to get better food) complained to the barrack leader - a Mr. Elekes from the city of Szeged - that someone keeps stealing her bread portion. There were no eyewitnesses to verify who the thief was, but the suspicion fell on nineteen-year-old Gabor Wein from the city of Bekes-Saba .

The administration of justice took place in the small empty spot in the middle of the barrack, before the many hundreds of watching eyes of the barrack inhabitants. The acknowledged punishment for stealing bread in Bergen-Belsen was shaming the thief. But Mr. Elekes disregarded this and passed a cruel decree. He took upon himself to be the judge, to pass sentence, and also to execute it. This insensitive Mr. Elekes acted like an

enraged, cruel wild-beast as he attacked this completely debilitated defenseless victim - beating mercilessly on his head and face, kicking him all over his lower body. Mr. Elekes had no right even to put a hand on this unfortunate lonely boy, so weakened from starvation from living in an inhuman condition for many months. Gabor Wein seldom left his place - his bunk bed - located in a dark hole where he wallowed steadily in the filth of his own body. (Later, shortly after liberation, Gabor Wein perished of complete exhaustion.)

As One with the Cattle Beets

With unwavering devotion I stood at my observation post every day - staring with horror at the ceaseless passing of giant army trucks full of the skeleton corpses. The horse-carts transporting these skeleton-dead bodies were pulled and dragged by the yet-living skeleton-like creatures. Then, with a painfully craving mind, I would look in the direction of the lifesaver cattle beets.

The intolerable starving made its impact on us as we languished in the concentration camp prison. We lived in a large mass of people. Our private existence was similar to that of a silkworm that retires into its shell. In reality, we lived a very close distance one from each other. But deep in our minds, we were far-removed one from another, carrying in a living-dead condition. And it is in this condition that and that I wove my unachievable dreams.

No peril could terrify me anymore. An act like this could be of great peril, and no one with full faculties would think of perpetrating it. But as the opportunity presented itself, I could not do otherwise but act. On this particular day our "dorge-muse" lunch arrived late in the evening - perhaps around nine o'clock. Because of the recurrent air raids around the camp, pitch darkness reigned after "lunch" was distributed. I rushed to get hold of one side of the big vessel (or rather garbage can). Fear seized my whole body and I shivered, but I was unable to think straight. A strange feeling overtook me and directed my actions. My mind stiffened from the great worry - owing to the daring undertaking. At the gate stood a policeman who was supposed to search the pockets of every returning person - looking for stolen goods such as cattle-beets. As soon as we put down the kitchen vessel, my shaking legs rushed me towards the forbidden direction. Perhaps there were about twenty-five more dish carriers carrying their empty dishes back to the kitchen, putting them

down as they entered the gate. When all the dish carriers returned, the big gate would close.

I had to perform my daring act in great haste - before the gate to our block closes, and before the watchtower guard fires on me with his machine gun. In a hairbreadth, I am crouching at the long-ago selected spot, scratching in pitch darkness, four precious pieces of cattle-beets already hidden inside my sock pants. Suddenly, the searchlight lights a small part of my black shoes. At that critical minute, a strange supreme force rushes me away from there, and out of mortal danger .

It was a deterring experience for me - but I could not do otherwise, a corrosive famine forced it upon me. Thank God I made it safely. I am sure the unseen upper hand of the Almighty watched over me during my daring action. In double pace, I reached the entrance gate to our courtyard. There stood the police guard who just looked on, but did not stop me. All the way back to my three-story bunk bed, I felt like someone who just returned from beyond the grave. My face looking deathly pale and still paralyzed with fear, I was unable to speak a single word. I silently pulled out from my trousers four pieces of lifesaver cattle-beets. On the spot I shared it with my dear mother, my sister and the brothers; a tidbit reward was also given to our two nice gentlemen next bunk bed neighbors .

After my daring act became known, there were other adventurous entrepreneurs in our block number thirty-six, but their plans were ill considered and hasty. They ended in mortal failure, except for one who escaped death between three comrades. The three friends decided to celebrate a birthday party for one of them, but instead of a sweet birthday cake, a few cattle-beets would do. The three climbed over the barbed wire fence at midnight, but as they reached the top of the fence, the watchtower light fell on them and the guard fired fatal bullets from his machine gun .

The SS Nazi German authorities ordered the dead bodies laid all day by the barbed wire fence side, for everyone to see what fate awaits bold and thoughtless inmates who try to jump over the barbed wire fence to steal a few cattle-beets in the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. Ironically, this tragic occurrence took place just a short time before our camp was liberated .

Peppo

One morning as I just stood about, Mr. Imre Reiner, one of our close neighbors, asked me to light him a cigarette. When I did, he presented me with a small cattle-beet slice, adding that he received half a cattle-beet every day from one of the SS Nazi soldiers as payment for shaving him. "Peppo", as the guard was known, was always seen with a pipe sticking out of his mouth. After our liberation, we found out that Peppo was really a high ranking British officer. When the British army liberated Bergen-Belsen, Peppo jumped onto the first jeep and sat beside a high-ranking British officer. Mr. Reiner added that since he ate half a cattle-beet every day, he would certainly survive the concentration camp, even if no one else did. Was he right? That we will find out after liberation .

Smelling Freedom Ahead

By late March 1945, days of sunshine and frequent air-attacks nearby radiated a gleam of hope from the beautifully clear and cloudless blue skies above. That eased our tormented and unhappy existence, planting seeds of hope into our indifferent, stiffened senses. During one of our most enjoyable afternoons, a multitude of us crowded outside the courtyard, gazing up in the same direction. A dogfight took place between our barbarian captors and future liberators. Our hearts and souls were filled with gratitude, as we fervently prayed for the allies' victory without casualties on their side. With great satisfaction, we stared as the German combat planes got shot down and caught fire, trundling down toward the abyss .

The Nazi authorities could not bear to witness our happiness, and the guards tried to chase us inside the barracks. But none of us moved an inch till the end of this pleasing event. Not even the begging of our own Jewish barrack leaders could intimidate us now.

Then, strange things started to happen. The Nazi guards no longer used bullets to force us inside the barracks. Instead, without shame, they cowardly asked us for civilian clothes. They, too, wished to be rid of the Nazi reign. For better results, they clothed themselves in Jewish inmate clothing while welcoming the allied forces.

At times in the hardest period of famine, the Polish-Jewish inmates received a distribution of raw potatoes. Our block - the Jewish inmates

from Hungary - did not. The Polish-Jews would not eat a raw potato, so we Hungarian Jews pulled out the wood planks from our bunk beds and exchanged them for potatoes. They burned the wood planks and cooked their potatoes, while we gladly consumed even the raw potatoes - with their dirty skins.

About this time, our barrack doctor called us to gather around him outside the courtyard, and informed us that anyone who wanted a vaccination against typhoid could get one. We stood around him, but it seemed that he just wanted to mislead the Nazi authorities. He did not really inoculate anyone.

Those days of brilliant sunshine and frequent air raids blew towards us the winds of our nearing freedom. This cheered us up from our long since numbed emotions. Certain occurrences still saddened me, leaving my heart pierced with holes. Skeleton cadavers were still transported to the crematorium all day long. An especially unfortunate event was the sorry sight of four miserable skeletal figures that dragged themselves along and had to pull and push the horse carts filled with skeleton corpses from early dawn till twilight. As I marked my eighteenth year, I wondered what surprises life had in store for me...

LIBERATION

April 7, 1945

It was under such circumstances that we lived to see the beginning of our rebirth. The year 1945, April the seventh; the day - Saturday. Wonderful blue skies with heart-warming bright sunshine smiling down upon us. In accord with my daily routine, I was just loafing about by the barbed wire fence inside the courtyard of block thirty-six. My gaze was directed toward two important locations over the fence - the kitchen and the cattle-beef clamp .

Suddenly, a band of SS officers appeared on the scene. A tall officer bawled out, "where is the dog"? He was referring to our block leader, Mr. Simon Fisher, whose face really resembled a St. Bernard dog. Soon, Mr. Fisher presented himself. This strange occurrence keenly aroused my interest. Does this signal good tidings as to our destiny? For better or worse, we find out in a few short minutes.

Orders from higher Nazi authorities called for a group of two thousand tormented Jewish souls - Hungarian, Polish, Dutch and Spanish - to leave Bergen-Belsen for good. The instruction singled out large families, but those who preferred to stay and be liberated in this camp were allowed to do so, while those singles who wished were allowed to join with this, the first transport to leave. At this time, I could think of no greater desire than to walk out alive through the big open gates of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on my own two feet. Together with my Mom, my sister Jolan and brothers Bela and Bandi, I felt this was a great privilege, an immeasurable reward from the Almighty.

In less than ten minutes, two-thousand "living dead" stood in lines of fives, as was the order of the SS Nazi leader named Kramer. Adults aged over twenty-one were given four cigarettes. As we stood in rows, my acquaintance F.F. came to my side to wish me speedy liberation from Nazi reign. In turn, I wished him the same good tidings.

Marching Out of Bergen-Belsen

With our meager belongings on our backs, we thus began marching out of Bergen-Belsen after unbearable suffering of many months. At our sides were armed Nazi guards, but now I could not care less; I just disregarded

their presence. With an elevated feeling, I walked on the camp's main road, leading us toward our long yearned for freedom .

As we approached block ten, the unfolding spectacle encompassed me. I saw a colossal hill made of skeleton cadavers, while yet-living skeleton-like creatures sat cross-legged on the bare earth or wallowed in their own filth. I dared ask the Nazi guard who walked by what would happen to the pitiful creatures in block ten. He answered that all those creatures in block ten would shortly perish, but that our group would survive!

At the time, our bodies were completely weakened, and we stood at the edge of the grave. Finally, we reached the huge open gate, where the armed Nazi guards at each side of the sentry box no longer frightened me. Proudly, with a sense of relief, I walked through the gate, leaving the Bergen-Belsen death factory behind me. Miraculously, I lived through the barbarian system to tell the world about the torture and murder of innumerable defenseless souls.

Back in the Cattle Trucks

For the time being, we marched to the railway station of Bergen-Celle. It was now Saturday afternoon. We were again herded inside empty cattle trucks filled to their capacity - we could only sit. There was not enough room to stretch our numbed legs. As was our habit, no sleep would come to our eyes. Hunger and thirst would prevent this.

As the sun rose on Sunday after a sleepless night, I got up to see what was happening outside the cattle trucks. I slowly walked out and was glad to discover a business exchange just opposite our transport. A group of Ukrainian civilians guarded a red-beet clamp and exchanged one red beet for each cigarette.

Seeing this I turned to my mom with a thrilling sense and asked her to give four cigarettes to exchange for beets. She gave me the cigarettes, but as I stepped off the cattle truck I was terribly disappointed. The Swabien SS guards were beating my fellow Jews with their heavy rifles, as punishment for the exchange. They were striking my people on the head, face and back without any compassion. Seeing this, I felt distressed and benumbed, and was rooted to the spot. I just leaned against the side of the cattle truck. Within a few minutes, the exchange area was clear of Jews. Sure enough, the Ukrainian exchangers were not

assaulted, even though they exchanged things that belonged to the Nazi authorities, while we Jews exchanged our own property .

The Ukrainians stayed close by, with only the SS guards patrolling the grounds. The instinct of hunger that does not comprehend fear guided my legs toward one of the armed SS guards. Still numb and speechless, I showed him the four cigarettes with an imploring look, indicating my plea to this murderous enemy of mine. He immediately understood and advised me to make a quick run before his commanding officer reappears on the scene. I hardly finished my exchange when the area once again filled up with my fellow suffering companions. The exchange goes on until the SS guards again strike out with their rifles. My mom evenly divided the four beets between the five of us, and we ate with a relish .

From Saturday the Seventh of April, 1945, our transport was stranded at the Bergen-Celle railway station. Our irresponsible captors, the SS Germans no longer provided us with food. After suffering from constant starvation for six long months at the de factory of Bergen-Belsen they left us now in total hunger and total thirst. By now, we had been steadily crouching inside the crowded cattle trucks for five days. We were too exhausted, dizzy and weak to grasp how grave our situation was. What do the Nazis have in mind?

Turning Point – 12 April, 1945

We now reached the most crucial hour of our life during World War II under German Nazi rule. From each and every truck, a Jewish leader was asked to appear before a high-ranking SS officer, who issued a disastrous order that we immediately carried out. All men between the ages of sixteen and sixty were to line up in columns of five in front of the cattle trucks, with the angels of death fluttering around. We had to fight them off, and - luckily for us - we won! Our deteriorating health prevented us from comprehending the great life-and-death peril we were in at the time. We did not sense how we hovered between life and death, but our subconscious felt and knew it.

A paralyzing darkness seized me. Time stood still until all the men returned to the cattle cars. Then, our leader told us what really took place. As our transport of two thousand souls somehow got caught up between two combatants - the US army fighting against Hitler's cowards - our SS captors decided to annihilate us all. They were going to gun down the

men with machine guns in front of the cattle cars, and then blow up the rest of us - babies, small children, women and the elderly - in the cattle cars. That was the decree that the Nazi beast devised when its hour of doom came. Our leaders persuaded the SS officers to withdraw the decree by bribing them with gold jewelry that the Spanish Jewish group had. The SS officers fled, leaving us to be liberated shortly by the US army. Thus, by the generous decree of the Almighty, we were rid of the cruel tormenting clutches of the German Nazis, on the precious date of April 12, 1945, around mid afternoon.

This is how our "door of freedom" opened wide before us. Our leaders told us how to behave, letting us know that we could leave the cattle cars, but must stay close by. We were also told that we were in close range of an ongoing heavy battle. Those who wished to sleep the night outside the cattle car could do so on top of the grassy hill just in front of us. We were presently situated twenty kilometers from the city of Magdeburg, between two small towns. To our right was Forsleben and to our left was Csilics. At long last, the enfeebled crowd began crawling out of its prison, although many were too faint to enjoy the very first steps of freedom. It looked like there was hope that the US army would liberate us for good from the barbaric domination of Nazi Germany by the morrow.

A Real Bath!

We soon spotted a small pond and together with my sister Jolan I took my first steps in its direction in order to take a "real bath in real water". As we walked there, a band of SS German officers were running away. One of them aimed at us with his small gun and fired some bullets with an accompanying last farewell to us - "swine Jew"! Luckily for my sister and I, we were far enough not to get hurt.

In front of the cattle car, we could see German civilians from the two nearby towns running in opposite directions on the main road, trying to escape from the approaching US forces. With dulled sense, we glimpsed towards them. Several SS guards stayed with us. Some of them asked for - and received - civilian clothes from our people.

Many of us spent the night on the grassy hill beneath the open, starry blue sky. A nearby gun battle illuminated the area through the night. Sounds of cannons kept us awake and we prayed fervently now more than ever for our liberators' swift victory.

The next morning we dug up recently planted potatoes we found between two stones, made a fire and cooked them. They tasted delicious. In the early afternoon, I again started walking towards the small pond, but then my little sister Jolan excitedly hollered to me: "hey you, come back fast, the US army has arrived!"

US Angel Soldiers

As much as my faint condition would allow me, I hurried to the scene of the miracle to welcome them, this being the big moment we so yearned for. Two angel-like American soldiers stood there beside their "magic" jeep. My sister and I looked on enchantedly as they took captive the several SS cowards who stayed in their shameful and disgraceful uniforms. The SS henchmen held up their hands while one of the Americans stood opposite them with a pointed weapon. Then, the second US officer searched their pockets.

These two dear, brave soldiers of valor hurried straight from the battlefield to liberate us from the satanic German Nazis. I just kept looking at their faces, which still reflected emotions of battle. Their eyes and face mirrored wrath as their glance fell on us, the feeble crowd. They came to liberate us and the many cadavers laid out in front of the cattle cars on the bare earth.

The American officers told us that an airplane spotted our transport leaving Bergen-Belsen, and that they escorted and watched us since then. In the event that our Nazi transport guards would attack us, they were ready to come to our defense. It was Friday, April the thirteenth, at about three p.m., when the gracious US army emancipated us - our group of two thousand living dead. They brought us back from the edge of the grave, from the satanic, barbaric, murderous clutches of the German Nazis.

Standing there and looking up at our liberators, I waited to sense some kind of emotion on this miraculous occasion - but no. Reality did not penetrate my consciousness. My senses were incapable of experiencing any signs of emotion - no tears of joy appeared, nor even the slightest smile. My senses were left stiff, in the aftermath of extended suffering. We are liberated, but only outwardly. Our mind still remained under great pressure, as heavy, dark clouds obscured our world of comprehension. It

will take a good many years to be free completely. When that time comes, if ever, we will be able to feel wholly liberated and shake off the shackles of bondage and imperceptible suffering.

Feeding Us Back to Life

Taking their German or Swabean SS captives along with them, the two American officers left us for now. The majority of our group was so feeble that they stayed inside the crowded cattle trucks. Some ventured to the nearby small towns for provisions. The following day, early in the afternoon, the US army arrived with a big army truck. They brought us a delicious hot meal, potato goulash with veal meat. Never before in my life, or after, did I eat as tasty a meal as this. I just looked on as those US soldiers of valor took care of our group of two thousand, going from cattle car to cattle car so patiently. After suffering so long from inhuman treatment, I felt a great distinction to be treated with human kindness by those American soldiers. It was like being born again.

With their kind devotion toward us they sowed back into our souls the sparks and seeds of human hopes and feelings. By Sunday morning, my sister Jolan and I plucked up some courage and crawled out of the cattle cars to look around at the nearby town of Forsleben. We were pleasantly surprised to discover that US officers were already strolling the locality, patrolling the place. Some of our fellow Jews were also around and about. The local population either locked themselves in their homes or escaped. None of them ventured to welcome the new liberators.

Suddenly we came by a friend of ours, Kati, with a smiling face. She invited us to taste from a big can of scrambled eggs that she just received from the American soldiers. Gladly, we did. With our bare hands, we grabbed a handful from it, thanking her for the kindheartedness .

Searching for Shelter

It thought that we should ask the American soldiers to place us (our family of five) in one of the houses instead of leaving us in the cattle cars, now that we were free. So I found myself approaching a pair of US soldiers and somehow conveyed my wish. The two American officers forthwith escorted my sister Yolan and I to a nice little house and rang the doorbell. Soon, the door opened and we entered this small, clean house. A certain Mr. Benedek saw us with the American soldiers and joined us as well.

The US soldiers told the two German women in the house that they wanted us to move into their flat. The women complained that their house was too small - which it was. The officer told me I could do as I pleased. I thanked him, but could not accept his generous offer. While the conversation took place, Mr. Benedek searched for provisions and found some canned goods in the house. I found his behavior disgraceful, and we left the house. Outside, I thanked the two American officers for their good intentions .

For a short time, we just strolled about in Forsleben, then walked back toward the cattle truck. Luckily for us, since just then came the time to move out. We climbed with our belongings up to a big US army truck, wondering where our dear liberators were transporting us. Amazed by the green countryside, our elevating ride soon ended. We arrived at a very nice small town called Hillersleben - here lived the SS German officers with their families.

Presently only the women and children remained - husbands and sons were still fighting Hitler's war. For the time being, we were placed in one big barrack. At the same time, the Nazi families were removed from their beautiful flats. They were allowed to take with them only the contents of one backpack. They were instructed by the US army to leave everything in good condition for our use. American soldiers distributed lunch in a big kitchen not too far away, and my brother Bela went every day at sunset to bring it to us. We received provisions two or three times daily from this kitchen.

My Mom - and the four of us, her children - left our barrack to take in some fresh air. Some American soldiers joined us for a short while and gave us chocolate bars and chewing gum. This was the first time we encountered chewing gum. They also presented me with a lady's wristwatch. I valued it dearly and took great care of it. (But somehow, when I was heading for aliya to Palestine in the year 1946, some heartless thief stole it from my pocket - probably in Bucharest, the Romanian capital.)

The American army ordered us to move to a nearby building the next day. We did not yet have separate beds here for each member of the family, so I recall using a big billiard table as my sleeping place. We had a nice big bathroom - no more cleanliness problems for us. I took all my nice dresses and tried to get rid of the lice on them. But they settled on the

collars, swarming by the hundreds. I tried washing them out in the washtub, but this did not work. Angrily, I threw them out the window, and saw other people picking them up - all of them.

Slowly Eating Back to Health

We now lived in a big building. Each entrance had a person responsible for conveying public orders from the US leadership. We were instructed to eat only the provisions supplied by American army. Because of our very weak heart condition we were not allowed to eat anything more. Whoever did not keep this directive jeopardized his or her life. In those early days following our liberation, I experienced much stomach pain. Thus, most of the time I stayed on the big green billiard table. Also, I suffered from being dizzy and weak .

One day, my brother Bela took too long to come back with our lunch, and I decided to check on him. We all felt very hungry. In my poor condition, I slowly and cautiously descended down the steps and reached the entrance door. Whom did I have the luck to see - none other than a former admirer of mine who was now busy with his belongings. I just hoped that he would not see me, but was amazed to suddenly feel strong enough to hurriedly climb up the steps. After a short while, my brother came with our lunch, reporting with delight that he met my former acquaintance. I told my brother that I am not at all interested in meeting this young man, or anyone else for that matter. This boy also told my brother that Bergen-Belsen was freed by the British army on the fifteenth of April 1945, but he and some friends left there to join us in Hillersleben .

Soon all the German families were evicted from Hillersleben. We also had to leave our present abode, as the US army temporarily took residence of this region. We were housed in a wooden building together with other families. Army officers ordered us all to appear for questioning, then issued an official card indicating which army regiment liberated us, the place of our liberation, along with our personal data - name; date, place and country of birth. As we stood in the long line, American soldiers sprayed disinfectant on our outer clothing. After receiving our official cards the US army presented each and every one of us with fabric for making clothing, dresses for the women and pants for the men .

Shortly afterwards, we moved into a very nice clean flat. The entrance hall included a big bathroom - with wash tub and toilet - and a big kitchen

with dishes and all the modern facilities in it. There were five rooms, each with a separate entrance door with lock. Our neighbors were all very nice, intelligent people. Three of the families were Polish Jews, and two Hungarian male friends occupied the other room. We lived in great harmony with all the other inhabitants in this flat.

Reuniting with Survivors

Before long, the Jewish survivors from Holland were transferred home on big American army trucks. From nearby environs, more captives from different nationalities that were freed by the US army were brought here to Hillersleben. They all received comfortable accommodations. French prisoners of war were also transferred back to their country. While the war still went on, this little town also had Italian captives - some Polish some Jews. Also, there were some Yugoslavians who were non-Jews. Some of them volunteered to work for Nazi Germany during the war. A former acquaintance of mine also moved into the building of our residence, together with a friend. This former acquaintance came looking for me too often, sometimes even chasing after me, but I always eluded him.

Once, I remember he came to our place under the pretense that he was my brother's friend. The minute he appeared at the door I rushed out without giving him a chance to have a single word with me. Whenever we were moved to a different building he was always there, close to me. Several months later, he sent his friend to ask me why I was not interested in him anymore. I flatly told him I never was. He later told my brother that he wrote some warm love letters to me, but tore them to shreds after hearing his friend's unresponsive report. Subsequently, he "took leave" from my brother, admitting that he could not endure to stay near me any more. Therefore, he must return to his birthplace, Nagyvarad. We gave him two letters to mail when he is Hungary, one addressed to my father (in case he was still alive), and the other to a Christian neighbor.

Then there was another young man from Hencida, the son of a former friend of my parents, whom my mother wished to marry me off to. He came to Hillersleben after the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, seeking every chance to talk to me. Confused, I always eluded him. Most of those chances took place in the beautiful park in the locality where we all often strolled, enjoying nature. Once, we met face to face, and he asked me why I always eluded him. He indicated his desire to spend some time in

my company. Shamefacedly, I let him know that I was just not interested in any young man companion. And that was the truth. He was a real gentleman. Never again did I bump into him .

Although both these young men were good looking, well mannered and intelligent, I was not interested in them - or in anyone else for that matter. I had just reached my eighteenth birthday at the time, but it seems that the aftermath of suffering left me with too heavy mental pain. Those feelings of a healthy teenager's desires were locked within me, like other pent-up feelings choked deep within me - an outcome of our suffering during World War II.

Our Liberators

Now about our generous, kind, angelic liberators who freed us from Nazi hands. As I look back over the long years that passed, and recall the group of 2,000 of which I was a part - how we must have looked when we were freed from Bergen-Belsen! I must say that the soldiers who freed us were like angels from heaven. They took care of us with great devotion. They worked hard with their fine kindness that saved our lives. They placed us in the nicest looking houses in the area to make us comfortable. They prepared the special meals we needed because of our weak and sick condition. In short, the US army pulled us back to life from the edge of the grave. They did all they could to build up our spirit and health so damaged by the Nazis. Never have I met such devoted human kindness. Their humanity led us back to our rightful life as human beings on earth .

The US army freed us on the thirteenth of April 1945. When they left us we were all sorry that they hadn't given us a chance to thank them for all their kindness. Now, after so many years, let me at least say, "thank you very much" to those devoted and kind US soldiers. Within 24 hours they put up a hospital for our sick! They put us up in comfortable quarters and went from room to room looking for the sick and infirm. If they found someone in bed or looking too pale-faced, they immediately carried them to the hospital. There they conducted their efficient check-ups. Many of us were sick with spotted-typhus, a very infectious disease. Two of the American doctors who treated us contracted it and sadly enough died from it .

Overindulgence

Shortly after our liberation I met two former tenants of our barrack in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. One was an older man, Mr. Falik from Szeged. The other fellow was a young married father aged about 32 years old - Mr. Reiner from Rakospalot. Both gloated about some special food they ate. Mr. Falik boasted about eating a full plate of vermicelli made of potato pasta. Mr. Reiner bragged how he went to Forsleben and grabbed a live goose in one of the courtyards, wrung its neck, baked it and finished eating it all by himself. That was the last we saw of them. They both died shortly after boasting how they ate foods other than what our liberators provided us. The US army warned us not to eat any food besides what they provided, as our stomachs had become too sick and weak for other food. We also heard about others who ate other foods and perished out of their own carelessness.

VE Day

On May 8, 1945 came the unconditional surrender of Hitler and Nazi Germany, VE day - victory in Europe for the allies and for us. It was a great day in Hillersleben but our emotions were still stiff. Its meaning did not penetrate into our consciousness - only our subconscious responded to it.

Our residence was located opposite the hospital and thus we often met some of the US soldiers who worked there. I especially remember two of them. One was named Vencel; he always gave us chewing gum accompanied with a heavy smile. The other, whose name we did not know, we nicknamed "the chocolate soldier", simply because whenever he saw us he gave everyone a chocolate bar! Then there was a Mr. Yosef Sarkady who gave to us his full address in the US and begged us to write him when we got home. Somehow we never did, but we will always remember him! He gave my sister Jolan nice long brown boots, and also gave us a hunted stag, which we did not eat.

There was an open-air swimming pool for the use of US officers only in front of the hospital building, but they used it only on Sundays. We would watch them from our flat window, and we really enjoyed it. Other than that, we had very little entertainment, other than enjoying our much longed for freedom. We often strolled around in this nice small town or in nearby Forsleben. Also, we would walk a long way to the Elba Lake every day with my cousin Magda and take a sunbath.

Together with my sister Jolan or friends, I spent many pleasant hours at the nearby fruit orchard, where the cherries were ripe for picking. One day we met a German woman there - she was probably one of the orchard's owners, but she dared not talk about it .She told us that she did not like Hitler, and that her son died in the war because of him .

“Piroshka” Eyes

One day, my cousin Magda asked to go with her to bring milk. My brother Bela generally took care of our provisions, waiting in long lines at the US supply kitchen and bringing home supplies. But since this particular day, I was the one who brought our family milk. Very simply, I became hypnotized by a pair of kind beautiful eyes which belonged to one of the US soldiers I never got to know. As we stood beside the stone wall waiting in the long line, I still felt very sad, with my appearance mirroring the inner pain. Suddenly, I felt a magnet pulling my glance, and found myself looking straight up into his smiling eyes. Several other soldiers stood beside him, but I saw only him. They all stood above in an open terrace, and we could only see their upper body. It was summer and they wore only a sleeveless white undershirt .

Since that day I always came myself for milk. Sometimes I came with other cousins too, and I was so charmed by my hypnotizer. I offered all my cousins to enjoy looking into his eyes, as he had the nicest eyes I ever looked into. My cousins found other nice eyes to look into them, but when I checked them, I declared that no one else has such beautiful eyes, and I would always look for the one who hypnotized me .

Magda named my chosen Piroshka, because he had a nice red suntanned face. She guessed that he must be about twenty-two years old. So each time we came we would talk about "Piroshka", always standing there looking at us with a beaming smile on his face (I found out twenty-five years later that he understood our Hungarian language, and that was probably what made him smile.) One Tuesday afternoon as we strolled by we saw Piroshka leaning out from one of the building's big windows. He greeted us with his big smile and we went on our way. We somehow found out that the American soldiers had a party each Tuesday, so we would go by to look at "Piroshka", happy to see that he took some interest in us too .

Moving Along

Those who wanted to emigrate to Palestine or any other place that opened its gate to the Jewish people now had the opportunity. Many took up these offers instead of going back to their country of birth. My brother Bela also wanted very much to go to Palestine but I begged him to stay with us .

Big trucks came and those who chose to emigrate were taken to Magdeburg, from where they continued to their final destination. Some of my friends suggested we could go to Magdeburg with these trucks, see the destroyed city, and then return home with them. I like the idea of seeing the big city, so without telling my mother, I joined my sister and climbed up on a truck. We soon arrived at the Magdeburg railway station, and all the passengers left - except for my sister, myself, and a young man who also just wanted an adventure. The German driver, probably a former Nazi, told us to get off. We told him that we had to go back with him to Hillersleben, but he said that he was not returning there. Flatly, he forced us off his truck.

Now the three of us were in an unknown big city. We knew no one, and in my ignorance I walked with my companions to the nearby US headquarters. There I explained our problem to one of the officials, who thought about giving us a ride back to Hillersleben. However, he just gave us a letter of recommendation to be handed to the leading official at a far away place where mainly Yugoslav Jews were concentrated after the liberation. It was at the outskirts of Magdeburg - if I recall correctly, the neighborhood was called New Stadt. We had to walk there, and then we would receive a ride back to our place.

We began our long walk asking the German residents for directions. We always received the same answer - go straight, then right, then left. After several hours of walking, one German lady told us it was too far for walking, so she gave us 50 Pfennig to hire a horse-cart. We thanked her generosity and did as she advised. Now as we sat comfortably in the horse-cart, we could look around in amazement at this much talked about old town. Very few houses stayed whole, most of them were bombed out and destroyed as a result of Hitler's war.

When we arrived at our destination it was already late afternoon. We found the Jewish leader of the camp, who welcomed us heartily and gave

us salami sandwiches. He promised to take us home to Hillersleben the following morning around 10 a.m. and added that the camp was almost empty, as the inhabitants were transferred back to their country of birth. He let us choose our own room for the night, apologizing for the shabby conditions prevailing. The windows in most rooms were all broken, while others had no doors .

After much deliberation we found two rooms separated by a door. The uninvited boy took the one with one bed - he did not even introduce himself to us, just followed us around like a dog. My sister Jolan and I took the other room, which had separate beds. The first-floor flat had no glass in the window frame, so anyone could easily jump in from the street. Thank God, no one did !

We could not lock the door between the two rooms, so we pulled an old sewing machine we found in front of it in case the boy next door tries to visit. We dared not sleep through the night, just watched the door and window. Thank God nothing happened, and morning soon came.

The three of us decided not to wait until ten a.m. for the ride, opting instead to walk the 20 km. to Hillersburg. We thought about our worrying mother and started on our way at six a.m. in the morning, asking the German residents for directions. We had a pleasant jog and enjoyed the countryside. By ten a.m. we arrived home safe and sound. Our mother heard us out, but we heard no harsh words from her.

Changing of the Guard

We were so delighted with our liberators - just looking at them gave us a special pleasure. They so amazed us; in our childish way of thinking we imagined they walk like angels, so we nicknamed them "the Angel Soldiers". After being treated so inhumanly by our Nazi captors for such a long time, our liberators' kindhearted devotion overwhelmed us, restoring warm human feelings into our heart and soul.

It was again a Tuesday afternoon. My sister Jolan and I took our walk to claim a hearty smile from Piroshka leaning out of an open window of their elegant building. But as we approached the usual place a sense of disappointment possessed me. No, I told my sister, Piroshka is not there. Then suddenly, we heard a fine voice calling out "hello". We turned around in the direction of the voice, there stood Piroshka behind a big

tree, over six feet tall and in full uniform – a handsome, kind and beautiful officer, his deep bluish gray eyes like a movie star. I was completely enchanted by him. Piroshka stood with a camera in his hands, taking a picture of us.

When he finished we turned to go and left him there alone. He did not talk to us. As I turned to go, I very clearly remember feeling a sharp pain steal in the lower left side of my heart. I wondered what that symptom meant. Just out of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and in my brainwashed mental condition, it was impossible for me to grasp its meaning just then. I just felt like an ignoramus. [[But I was destined to find out in a most intricate way, after twenty-five years, just how much my feelings were touched by him then.]] I simply did not understand at the time because of the dark subconscious world I left in the aftermath of the great suffering during World War Two.

The next day we understood that by taking our picture Piroshka was bidding farewell. The U.S. army left Hillersleben and the whole area around midnight. Early the next morning the British army already took over the locality. They, too, were nice to us, but in a somewhat different manner – less friendly and less warm. We still got our regular provisions, but we very much missed our liberators.

At some point while we were at Hillersleben the “Badiglio” Italian farmers who were taken prisoner by the Nazis were also placed here. They made a scarecrow out of rags, its face resembling Hitler’s, and invited everyone in our camp to march with them to a nearby, lovely little town. During the course of the big march some of the Italian boys loudly declared Hitler is kaput while one of them at head of the multitude displayed the Hitler rag. All the while the German residents shut themselves in their houses. They dared not stay in the streets. Some timidly peeped out their windows.

After the march we all came back to Hillersleben. In a big playing-field the Italians burned their Hitler to ashes, dancing and singing that Hitler is kaput.

Under the Care of the Russian Army

Now the British were also due to leave the area. The Russians would be taking over, but beforehand the British offered the whole group to take them along. The British army did not wish us to live under the reign of

Communism. They even brought twenty enormous army trucks to handle the logistics. But as most of the people here were Jews born in Hungary, they preferred to go home and had to wait for the Russian army.

So early the next morning the British army left with the twenty empty trucks. They had hardly left when the Russian army arrived. Unfortunately for us, our regular provision took a drastic turn for the worse and was greatly reduced. We received a bread ration, margarine and a wish-washy oily concoction with some barley in it from the Russian kitchen. Everyday the same lunch. We also took green tomatoes from the gardens around the building and made sandwiches with them. The Russian authorities also moved us out of our flats, handing them over to their own men.

The Hungarian Jewish actors who were part of our group staged performances in honor of the Russians on two occasions, and all of us were invited to watch and enjoy. The Russian army also put on a nice theatrical performance – they had some really good actors and we quite enjoyed the entertainment. A sporting event featured the Russian soldiers playing football against the Italian Badaglio. Sure enough, with their wild manner, the Russian soldiers won.

I do not remember exactly when, but in a Hillersleben orchard two women engaged in an ugly fight over the attention of an older gentleman. One of the women used to dwell in the same barrack as myself in Bergen-Belsen, so I knew her. She lived with a young child and both her parents. The other woman was not married. They pulled each other's hair and shouted at each other. "Let me have him," said the younger one. "You have your husband, so let me have him," said the older one. Their man stood by helplessly as this strange performance unfolded.

Among the Russian soldiers were two young lads with bicycles. We gave them some cigarettes which the Americans had given, and in exchange they let us borrow their bikes. My cousin Magda took us for tours of nearby towns. Then we discovered that we could travel for free by train, and went to see a movie (also free). We had no money!

A Detour on the Way Home

August came and the Russians told us they would be taking us "home". We had to be ready early the next day and we will be transported by train.

One of the Russian lads came to bid us farewell. He gave my mom four hundred Mark and received in turn presents worth the sum – cigarettes, a harmonica and more.

Before leaving the place, some of our fellow Jewish neighbors smashed to pieces valuables such as a nice set of china. I found their behavior unacceptable, in spite of what the Germans did to us.

We boarded a cattle truck, misled by the Russian army. They told us we were going back to Hungary.

After a few days of travel our transport came to a halt at Doberlug-Kirchheim (?), a small city in Germany. Led by a Russian officer we marched from the railway station through a small town on the outskirts and arrived at a small forest. "Make yourself at home," said the Russian officer. We had hardly arrived when a fight broke out with the Nazi-Hungarian band that had already occupied this forest. Our leaders told the Russian officer that we could not share a forest with Nazi Hungarians, so he marched us back to the railway station. The lucky ones in our group moved into a building while the rest of us took lodging in a basement waiting room in the railway station. It was so crowded there that some of us found places only on the steps. Thus we spent our first night.

After a day or so we moved into a nearby railway control booth, its floor filthy with human defecation. We cleaned up thoroughly and, together with my aunt and cousins, moved there instead of residing on the steps leading to the railway station waiting room.

Food? We received food maybe twice during our two week stay. We took walks around the compound looking for something to eat, but found nothing, not even in the nearby forest.

In one of the nearby little towns some Jewish women from Budapest, block-mates from Bergen Belsen, found residence inside a movie theater. They were liberated by the Russian army, and rumor had it that all of them were also raped by their liberators.

We met another two groups there, a group of single young women, and a group of single young men. One of the young women had an Italian boyfriend who planned to marry her, and was already carrying his child in her womb. Later we found out that when they arrived in her hometown the

women's father forbade the marriage, chased away the Italian boyfriend and found his daughter a Jewish husband.

After several weeks in this impossible situation, our Jewish leaders traveled to Berlin to beseech the United States authorities for immediate relief. The Russians responded the following day by herding us – along with the two groups of women and the young men – aboard a cattle truck and transporting us to Funterswalde, a small town nearby. Here, we were imprisoned under the guardianship of the Russian army. Overcome by sadness, I wrote a short poem expressing my feelings.

[]

The Russians assigned us to three rooms: one for families, one for single women and one for single men – the doors of the latter two rooms facing each other. Our room had mostly mothers with their children, along with very few husbands. All of us lay on blankets on the floor.

One of our roommates, a young mother with three small children and her widowed mother, had lost contact with her husband, who was taken to a forced labor brigade. As many of the men taken to forced labor brigades perished during the war, this young mother wanted to secure her future, so she befriended a lover. So in the midst of hundreds of people on the floor, this woman and her lover lay side-by-side at one end of the blanket, while her children and her mother lay at the other end of the same blanket. Several weeks later when she arrived in her hometown in Hungary, her husband waited for her at the railway station, and she bade her lover goodbye, leaving him in the cattle car as all around chuckled.

In Doberlug the Russian confined us to a big building with a very small courtyard for walking space. It felt very gloomy. Our provisions here consisted of a small bread ration and the same oily liquid with barley for lunch each day.

We awoke one night to the clamor of drunken Russian guards who entered the young women's room intent on raping them. But the young Jewish men came to their rescue and chased the Russian guards out.

BACK TO HUNGARY

A Rude Awakening

After less than ten days we again boarded the cattle cars, this time back to Hungary. The doors were not locked this time as we traveled through many German cities and then through Czechoslovakia. We passed by some beautiful places, but our senses were too numb to enjoy them. The sojourn from Doberlug to Budapest took about ten days, including the two days of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. We should have spent those days praying in synagogue and were outraged by the Russian's insensitivity in forcing us to desecrate our most important holidays.

The cattle cars slowly came to a halt at the railway station on the outskirts of Budapest. As we awaited our due welcome back in Hungary, I overheard a degrading conversation between two Christian girls who stood opposite our transport and surveyed us. "Look at those Jews," said one of the girls, "they came back many more than were driven out."

Oh, how I felt! Right then and there I decided that Hungary was no place for me to live in anymore. I was so sad and disappointed.

We were slowly driven to a place where a Jewish official recorded our presence, gave us some provisions and assigned us a place to sleep. We stayed here about two nights. One of the Jewish officials was a good friend of my mother – so they sat and reminisced about old times for most of the day. My sister Jolan was sent for vacation to the Balaton.

Puspokladany: "Home" At Last

Early Thursday morning our group of a couple hundred concentration camp survivors again boarded the cattle cars, on the way to Puspokladany. At long last we arrived home – or so we hoped. A young lady from Puspokladany, serving as Joint Distribution Committee representative, waited for us at the railway station and provided us with a little cash.

My first steps turned out to be mistaken strides. I went to visit a non-Jewish girlfriend, to reclaim a gold ring, a wristwatch and some other valuables I left with her before we were deported. She warmly welcomed me but told me that the Russian soldiers took all my belongings. She also

told me that she was certain that I would not be returning to Hungary, as she heard I went to Palestine after our liberation.

I followed this short visit with a sad sojourn on the familiar streets leading to our residence. My brothers already started organizing our former apartment, which was empty. Some of our friendly Christian neighbors then returned the furniture which they removed a year beforehand, and the B. Kiss family from Arany Janos Street even presented us with honey.

The Dark Reality

But we had to stand up and face the stark, dreadful reality. My father and older brother were not waiting for us there, and soon enough someone would certainly enlighten us as to their disastrous fate. The warm Jewish community which subsisted in Puspokladany prior to March 1944 was no more – most of the members perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Eyewitnesses told us how some of our friends deported to Auschwitz were heaved alive atop of corpses and then taken to the crematoria – burned alive! One of them was the daughter of our former teacher, the other a young man of about twenty-five years whose brother, Ferenz Yoszef, instructed the Nazi guard to take his brother off the heap of dead bodies. When the Nazi guard refused, Ferenz Yoszef fearlessly slapped the guard in his face, and was immediately shot dead. A ten-year-old boy related how a few nights before being liberated in Austria, Austrian SS soldiers murdered his mother, two of his sisters and twenty other Jews at midnight.

Without my father and older brother, Puspokladany felt more like a cemetery than a home. We plodded downheartedly along the streets, walking by many Jewish houses whose tenants would never return because they perished in Hitler's concentration camps. At home and on the streets, my eyes brimmed with tears, my heart ached with grief. My dearest friends perished in the gas chambers.

On Yom Kippur, our most sacred day, only my brothers attended synagogue prayers. The Festival of Sukkot – Tabernacles – which we so enjoyed in the past, left us cold. We were not touched even by one of our friends presenting us with a scrumptious stuffed cabbage. On the contrary, I felt humiliated by the present and refused to taste it.

Farmhand

My mother bartered some goods in exchange for food from our neighbors. I also worked with some of our Christian acquaintances on their farm, and received corn as payment. With it, my mother fed our poultry stock.

I worked one day with the Keseru family, then three days with the Bede family from Kurucz Street – Mr. Bede, his son and daughter, both around my age at the time, about 18 years old. At nightfall, Mr. Bede and his son rode home with their horse cart, filled with dried corn on the cob. His daughter stayed with me in the field for the night, so that we could start to work early in the morning. We chose not to sleep in the comfortable cabin at our disposal, for – as Bede's daughter pointed out – a Russian soldier might drop in and rape us. Instead, we spent the night outdoors under the cold blue sky, hollowing out the bottom of a stack of straw for minimal comfort. But it was still much too cold.

The following night my companion decided we could find shelter with a neighbor – a mother with two young boys. The family slept in the cabin's one bedroom, leaving us the kitchen. Our bed – some straw strewn on the kitchen floor. We slept fully clothed and with shoes, under a coarse blanket and with a small light from the bedroom shining in our eyes. Tired and weary as I was, I couldn't fall asleep. A band of insolent mice kept me awake all night, racing inside my clothes, hiding in my sleeves and trousers, and running incessantly about my head, face and hands. What a nightmare! And what a relief when morning broke – alas, I got rid of the mice!

No other Jewish girls worked as farmhands in Puspokladany at the time. Still, I felt comfortable with the work, although a sense of embarrassment did creep in when my friends saw me working.

What Happened to My Older Brother?

One day I finally summoned up the courage to inquire as to my older brother's fate from one of his friends. He told me that they were together until reaching Mosonmazyar. From there my brother was taken with others to Mathausen, while the friend escaped together with another young man to his hometown.

This resourceful friend of my brother, just nineteen years old, already opened his own tailor shop. He was quite a handsome young man. I brought him some fabric and asked him to sew pants for my younger brother, but he refused, as he was too busy. His rejection left me deeply offended, as I yearned for his friendship since the age of ten. All those years I dreamed that he would ask me to marry him when I turned eighteen, as that is the proper age for a girl to get married. His lack of interest in me – at least as far as I could tell at the time – greatly worried me.

Most of our Jewish brethren from Puspokladany were murdered by the Nazis and their Hungarian "Arrow Cross" accomplices. Only two families returned with all family members alive. Altogether, just a little more than a dozen families returned in one composition or another. Most of the few who did return were young men and women. Very few men aged 40-50, who were taken to forced labor brigades returned.

Trying to Subsist

Brokenhearted and bitter, we tried somehow to survive the new challenge of earning a livelihood. A few shopkeepers opened their former shops, while two lucky people coordinated the JDC office, which gave a ridiculously small amount of cash to newly returning refugees.

Two women whose husbands perished worked as housekeepers for men whose wives were murdered by the Nazis. Both of the housekeepers subsequently married their employers.

Our situation turned out to be more complex, as my mother could not work as a housekeeper – she was too delicate and sensitive, and had worked as a schoolteacher before marrying my father. Besides, who would want to marry a mother with four children?

"Your Father is Not Coming Back"

One Sunday afternoon I strolled by the house of owner of what had been the Grunfeld iron shop – no member of the family came back from Auschwitz. A Mr. Sandor Gross stood in front of the house. He lived there with a gentile woman in an extramarital affair. Mr. Gross asked me if I planned to continue working as a feather and leather trader, the

profession my father had trained me in prior to the war. Mr. Gross, too, had engaged in that business.

I answered him quite honestly that I hoped my father would soon return home, and that we would continue working together. Without thinking too much, Mr. Gross hit me bluntly with the cruel fact, "your father is not coming back; he was murdered in Debrecen by Hungarian gendarmes!"

My immediate reaction was, "no, you are lying!" However, I felt the earth slipping beneath my feet. Without another word, I left him, tears flooding my eyes.

Thus I wandered through the streets of Puspokladany. I stopped by a gentile acquaintance and sobbingly told them the sorrowing news of the loss of my father, who had always been my strength, my sunshine and my hope.

Gone was the last thread of hope which had kept me going through the suffering in the concentration camp, in the shadow of death. My spiritual world was now likened to a shipwrecked vessel tottering between sinking and surfacing.

Then I went home and dared not tell my mother (she already knew, but similarly kept the information away from us). Together with sister Jolan and brother Juda, I went to ask a Mr. Stern if it's true that or father had been murdered. But he could not verify this, just as I could not tell him how his wife and four children were taken from Strasshof to Auschwitz to be murdered in the gas chambers.

Trying to Reconnect with Old Friends

A few weeks had passed since we returned to Puspokladany and about two or three of my former friends came back. I could not visit them as yet – I felt too down hearted. When Edith L. came to my place I welcomed her. She had been a close friend of mine and we always understood each other quite well, this time too.

But I still felt alone and forlorn. Once I went to a shop looking for a job. The owner told me that he is not hiring anybody as he is leaving the country soon. I so needed a little push, a false rumor to hang on to, a few good words to lift my sinking spirits. But there was nobody to help me.

The following episode underscores just how broken we felt, how we were robbed of our willpower and our determination to act independently, how we dragged along as living dead in the aftermath of the concentration camps. Shortly before we were herded into the ghetto (May 18, 1944), my father had entrusted 100 kg of goose-down – worth 2,000 Hungarian Pengo at the time – in the hands of Egri Layos of Berettyujfalu, a Christian goose-down trader. After my mother heard of our father's tragic death she asked a relative of ours in that city to reclaim our property. But Egri Layos insolently replied that he would return it only to our father. Paralyzed by fear and a sense of helplessness we did nothing in response.

ON THE WAY TO PALESTINE

Nothing to Live for in Puspokladany

One Saturday afternoon I plucked up enough courage to join a gathering of religious young men and women just before the meeting finished. One of the young men sent his cousin, Edith, to invite me to go with them to Palestine. "Be at the gas station by seven a.m. tomorrow morning if you want to come," Edith said.

I thought over my situation here in Puspokladany and it seemed so dark and hopeless. My father was dead and the young man who my heart desired expressed no interest in me. So I decided to punish him. Just like when I was ten years old, I could think of no other girl in town suited for him to marry. So my leaving would be real punishment for him (and later I found out that it really was)!

Thus I decided to take up the invitation and move to Palestine, just six short weeks since we came back to Puspokladany. This resolution sprang out of my state of embitterment. I saw no hope, no future for me here. I felt compelled to go.

I went home and told my mother. She accepted my decision.

Parting from Puspokladany

That Saturday night I packed my few belongings, and early the next morning, November 1, 1945, I left our gloomy home for good. My dear, saintly mother escorted me to the corner of Bocskay Street, where our schoolhouse stood. The building was now empty and dilapidated.

I met my friends at the appointed meeting place. My heart still ached to leave my childhood chosen one, so I asked my co-sojourner Edith to join me and part from Isaac, whose store was situated nearby. We told him of our pending move to Palestine and asked him how he could bear to stay in Puspokladany, but he just wished us luck and said no more.

A gentile woman soon joined our party of three trying to hitch a ride. After a wearying wait from seven a.m. to about four p.m. a Russian army truck gave us a lift to Budapest – or so we believed. Two hours into the ride the truck stopped and one of the Russian soldiers said that the male

hitchhikers must get off now, but that the ladies may remain. The four of us thanked them for their generosity but decided not to continue with them.

We were now in the city of Szolnok, near the railway station. With Russian soldiers patrolling all about we bought our tickets to Budapest, the next train due in several hours. The young man, Edith's cousin, advised us to crouch on the benches and covered us to make us look like packages so that the Russian soldiers would not molest us.

We boarded the train when it finally arrived, but there was no room for us inside so we found a place atop the car, as did many others. The Russian Army commandeered trains for its own needs, compounding Hungary's already severe shortage of trains following WWII.

Preparing for Aliya with Bnei Akiva in Miskolc

We approached the Bnei Akiva office in Budapest to apply for Aliya to Palestine. There we were informed that our Aliya preparations would take place in the city of Miskolc. Edith's aunt lodged us during our short three-day stay in Budapest, providing army cots in her small kitchen. We strolled the war-torn city by day, and an Arrow Cross leader was hanged in Budapest during our stay.

Thursday we boarded the train for a ride of a few hours to Miskolc, and debarked with night setting in, to the tune of gently falling snow piling on the mountainous region. A warm reception heartened our spirits shortly thereafter as we arrived at the Bnei Akiva facility at 11 Totonyalya Street. The religious Zionist Bnei Akiva organization shared this building with the non-religious Zionist Hashomer HaTzair organization.

All of our Bnei Akiva colleagues were young people, mostly homeless survivors of Nazi concentration camps. There were nearly twenty of us altogether. We worked 6-8 hours each day, except for Saturdays and Sundays. We also learned some Hebrew and attend lectures on Palestine, the land of our forefathers.

Food was very meager, and we received no meat at all, even on our Shabbat. The girls who performed kitchen duty prepared "hamburgers" from cooked vegetables, and instead of cake we made our own

doughnuts. We also made noodles, quite a difficult chore. Only one girl at a time worked in the kitchen.

Our living quarters consisted of three rooms on the second floor – one family room and two bedrooms. The Hashomer Hatzair group was housed on the third floor, and both our groups had kitchens on the first floor. Members of the Hashomer Hatzair group lived a shameless, ugly, free life. They had a big bed in their kitchen where one of the girls would sleep with a different boy from their group each night.

I thoroughly disliked the communal lifestyle, communal decision-making and dependence on others. But this was the only way to reach my goal. So I swallowed life's bitterness and went on, continuing to deeply mourn my father, older brother, relatives and friends. Also, I could not reconcile myself to leaving Isaac behind. My heart ached for him and his memory haunted my deepest feelings continuously.

The group voted that I work in the kitchen, leading to quite an unpleasant occurrence for me. Two heavy-set boys often came by for leftover food, and I served them alike. For some, reason, group members passed snide remarks about my favoring one of them, which was totally untrue. The comments, however, heartened this boy, who then took a serious interest in me, to the extent that he considered me his future intended. I had to put an end to his ideas, hard as it may be for him, and kept a distance from. It took a while, but he eventually got the message. Actually, nobody in the group interested me.

Sometimes on Sundays we went as a group to the movies. The films, "The Jude, Zuss," and "Dreyfuss" left a deep, sorrowful impression on me.

Pressure to Stay in Puspokladany

At some point an old friend of Isaac's joined the group. I asked him if he wished to write Isaac, and offered to bring Isaac his letter when I visited my family. Thus, I found a pretext to visit Isaac and give him another chance to express his feelings. Surely my heartache could not be one-sided! Nothing came of my first visit, although the conversation was pleasant.

At home it was very sad. My mom told me that a certain Mr. N. wished to speak with me. I went to his house, where he welcomed me with a stern expression and told me that as the oldest child I should stay at home with my mother and not go to Palestine.

I so wanted to accept Mr. N.'s suggestion that I could feel a flicker of hope steal its way into my suppressed, despairing inner world. I looked up at him, mutely begging him to continue with some words of encouragement. That at the age of eighteen my whole future lay before me; that there is hope for happiness here with my mom and family. But he said no more – he had no idea how lost I was. I still felt like I dwelled in a concentration camp, where words of hope could help put me back on somewhat solid ground. Thoughts of my father, who will never come back, filled my head. When Mr. N. finished what he had to say I relapsed back into my hopeless inner world and told him I could not stay here.

When I came home my mom also asked me to stay, but I similarly turned her down. My sister Jolan subsequently joined a Bnei Akiva group set to make Aliya to Palestine, but she returned when my mom ordered her back. Then my brother Bela joined a Bnei Akiva group and did make his way to Palestine.

So I returned to the Bnei Akiva group in Miskolc, months having passed with no progress in our Aliya plans. One of the leaders of our group irked me with her comments that I would not return from my family visits, and that at some point in the future I would probably emigrate to America, as she felt I was not a devoted Zionist.

One Last Visit to Puspokladany

Alas, word came from Bnei Akiva leadership in Budapest that we would soon be making Aliya. So our band of five – three girls and two boys – set off for home for the weekend to bid our families goodbye. As usual, I took a letter for Isaac from his friend.

Making our journey, we took a train that stopped in a small town on the way to our destination. We were told that the next train home would depart the following morning at eight a.m. It was the heart of winter, snowing and severely cold weather. We just looked at each other and didn't know what to do or where to go. We had no money to pay for a hotel, even if we could find one in this tiny town. Walking a few steps

towards the few houses we saw in the vicinity we asked a passerby if any Jews lived here. He told us there was just one Jewish family, a sister and brother, the brother working as a police officer.

We knocked and they quickly opened the door, welcoming us warmly after hearing our story. The sister prepared a refreshing, hot meal, including freshly made doughnuts. How good it felt to be in a warm house! We sat down for some conversation, and they told us about their large family – all but they having perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. When the brother complained about his sore back, I volunteered to tread on his back, noting that I had done so many times as a child on my father's back to relieve him of his backaches. He gladly took up my offer, and five minutes of treading left him quite relaxed. Our wonderful hosts let us join the sister in her room for the night, her room being the only one being heated on this frigid night.

We left early the next morning, afraid to miss the one daily train to Debrecen, on our way to Puspokladany. Here, too, we would have to wait several hours, so we three girls warmed up a bit at some of Edith's relatives in the city. The two boys' families lived in Debrecen, so they left us and went home.

I couldn't help recalling how a few weeks before I took a night train with my sister Jolan. Suddenly, the train stopped in its tracks in the midst of the Hortobagy, the great Hungarian lowland plains. It turned out the Russians took to locomotive engine for their own uses, leaving us in open, roofless boxcars. There we were, stuck in the wilderness in the harsh winter. Masses of people in sub-zero temperatures for 24 hours. We had nowhere to go – it was horrid. Two people froze to death during the night. My sister and I kept an eye out on each other so as not to fall asleep for more than a few minutes. While we were very grateful when our locomotive finally arrived, all of us were quite exhausted and felt cheated. But there was nowhere for us to complain about the Russian invaders.

The present train ride that took us "home" from Debrecen was much easier, but this, my last visit to Puspokladany developed into a very difficult and sad one. My heart felt heavy about having to go, even though nobody really forced me to leave. I delivered the letter to Isaac from his friend, informing him that I would soon be departing for Palestine, and that I could pick up one last letter for his friend in Miskolc on Sunday.

Even though all of us – my dearest mom, sister Jolan, brothers Bela and Bandy and I – were together for the weekend, our low spirits fashioned a gloomy atmosphere. I didn't step outside our house the entire Shabbat.

Isaac's Surprise

Feeling dejected and downhearted, I prepared to pick up the letter from Isaac to his friend Sunday morning. As I reached the corner of Hosok-Tere Street, I was surprised to see Isaac's brother. He further surprised me by asking me to remain in Puspokladany and work as his business partner. Even though he did not clearly spell out what was behind the invitation – I could guess.

My initial inclination was to take up the offer; perhaps the proximity to Isaac will warm him up to me. A glimmer of hope sparked my heart, but only for a fleeting second, as I concluded that by staying I would be cheating myself. So I told him, "no". He tried once more, begging me to stay and stressing that he has money to start the venture. But very sadly, I looked up to him and told him that I just couldn't stay in Puspokladany any more.

I dragged myself along and finally arrived at Isaac's tailor shop, to pick up his letter. As he took a break from his work to jot a few lines, I stood by the door, my heart aching at the realization that nothing would come of my childhood dream. This was likely the last chance for him to express any feelings he has towards me – and he showed none. I nearly cried.

But then, Isaac suddenly peered in my direction, and addressed me with a message befitting one aching heart to another, "Hogy van srived engem ithagyne" – "how can you have the heart to leave me behind". As he never displayed any interest in me before, Isaac's words shocked me. I did not know how to react.

Much as I loved Isaac and longingly awaited his approach, all I could think of was my mother's adage that only a worthless girl displays her love to a boy – for he will not value her. I had no idea if Isaac's words gave freedom to deep sentiments of his, or if he merely intended to flirt. So I decided to test him, and told him that he should come along with me to Palestine.

Hardly had I finished my reply, Isaac asked me – his radiant face happily mirroring his true inner feelings – to tell him how to go about going to Palestine. Isaac believed in me. I so regretted having tested him. I just wanted to stay beside him forever. His smiling expression beamed love and kindness. In the midst of my great excitement all I could answer him was that I would write him about the procedures.

What I really hoped and expected was that Isaac would immediately come with me to my mother and ask her for my hand in marriage. But he did not volunteer to do so, leaving me uncomfortable – I said no more, as I wanted him to continue to value me. Isaac finished writing the letter, gave it to me along with his own mailing address, with our agreement that I would write him and he would also come to Palestine. I believed that upon returning to Miskolc I could arrange Isaac's Aliyah through our counselor, and that we would be able to go together to Palestine.

Our agreement left me with a joyous feeling – I felt like I was in seventh heaven. I so hoped that someone or something would make me stay in Puspokladany. I fancied that when I broke the news to my mother she would surely tell me to stay. But to my chagrin, my mother kept very silent when I told. She said nothing, not one word. So much as I wanted to stay in Puspokladany, I could not bring myself to doing so. That proverbial "encouraging word" just never came.

Stuck in the dark aftermath of the concentration camp, I lost my chance to grab the good luck I waited for so longingly. I was left with no choice but to take leave from my dear mother, sister and youngest brother, and join my older brother on our way back to Miskolc.

Then, a new plan came to my mind, a plan that would allow me to make at least one more return to visit Puspokladany and see how serious Isaac really was. If Isaac was really serious, he could then join me in Miskolc and we could go to Palestine together.

But fate again played out very cruelly for me. The Almighty apparently had a very intricate future planned out.

My brother Bela and I took the train to Debrecen, with the next train from there to Miskolc scheduled for the following morning. We arrived in the evening, and went to our Debrecen relatives who warmly took us in for the night. But I was too impatient, and wanted to arrive as soon as

possible in Miskolc to arrange for Isaac to join me. So we put down our backpacks and went back to the train station to see if there was any way of getting to Miskolc sooner. We were informed that a train headed to Miskolc by way of Budapest was departing soon. We had enough money to purchase the train ticket that departed the following morning to Miskolc, but not enough to purchase a ticket to Miskolc by tonight's route via Budapest. I figured, though, that the Bnei Akiva office in Budapest would give us the missing cash. So I hurried back with my brother to pick up our backpacks and return board the train to Budapest. What a mistake that turned out to be!

Aliya Tomorrow!

Impatient and in love, the long and tiring trip took its toll on me – a superficial teenager. The Bnei Akiva representative in Budapest gave my brother cash for the trip to Miskolc, but informed me that my group from Miskolc was already in Budapest and set to make Aliyah – and that all of us would be departing for Palestine the following morning. I was instructed to send my mother a telegram with the news. This development thoroughly shocked me!

At another key juncture in my life, I was again speechless. I very much had hoped to recruit Isaac in Miskolc and make Aliyah together with him. All I had to do was open my mouth and say that I wished to postpone my Aliyah because... But the aftermath of the suffering and brainwashing in Bergen-Belsen kept haunting me – I was still not a free human being with a will of my own. I was too used to having my own will suppressed by others to disagree with the Bnei Akiva directive. I just nodded in agreement and joined my group, silently crying all the while. I still could not comprehend the freedom that was mine. In theory I could do as I wish – in practice my strained nerves left me paralyzed.

Stopover in Romania

My group joined others, and we were now some 40-50 people. We soon marched to our appointed meeting place, where a young Transylvanian man briefed us and taught us a few key Romanian words and phrases. Our trip to Palestine would involve a stopover in Bucharest, Romania. On the way, we would receive either forged Romanian identification cards, or – better – other people's identification cards. This would allow us to enter

Romania as returning residents. In exchange, we had to give our own identity cards, which would be used to enable others to enter Hungary.

Early Friday morning, we started our journey from Budapest in a big Russian army truck, traveling through the Hungarian countryside. Late in the afternoon we reached a small border town, where our leaders rented a big, empty, one-room store house from one of the local land owners. There, we accommodated ourselves on the bare floor, the women on one side of the room and the men on the other. We hardly had any food to eat, but at least the weather was pleasant. Being a religious group, we rested and prayed on Saturday.

Sunday we boarded the train to Romania, getting off at the city of Arad, Two local Bnei Akiva representatives waited for us, both with the first name, Chaim. They entered the railway station and arranged our clean entry into Romania with the stationmaster, saving us a potentially troublesome confrontation. The two Chaims welcomed us very kindly, finding a kind word for each and every one of us. One of them struck me as being a particularly attractive and fine human being, his big bright eyes reflecting a kind heart. Together with his younger sister, this Chaim resided on the Temple premises where our group was also housed.

Impromptu Proposals

There were plenty of empty rooms at the Temple, enabling the men and women in our group to sleep in separate quarters. We were told not to wonder about in the streets as a group, but most of us ventured out in pairs. However, I just laid inside the room, crying unceasingly for fear of losing Isaac's friendship because I left him behind – unintentional as that may have been.

Then, a knock at the door. "Come in," I said, getting up towards the door. It was Chaim coming to talk to me. He gently offered me to stay behind with his family, a suggestion worthy of serious consideration, but with little time for thought.

I was unsure if Isaac would follow me to Palestine. He might experience difficulties along the way, or he might just change his mind. Then what? Who knows if I might get another chance like this, even if I am just an eighteen-year-old teenager? With these thoughts running through my head, Isaac's kind face, beaming with love, suddenly entrenched itself in

my mind. Isaac believed in me! I decided never to disappoint Isaac, even if he does go on to break our agreement and not follow. So I politely turned Chaim down.

A few moments later, another knock on the door. It was Lezer, a shy young man who was part of my group from Miskolc. He asked me to join him for a short stroll outside – I hadn't the faintest what for, but I joined him. Lezer came out without any formalities and took me by surprise when he asked me to marry him, simple as that. Sorry as I was to hurt him, I softly answered, no.

Then there was another boy I met there, a former friend of my brother Bela from the concentration camp. This boy carried my bags and kept close company. I did not initially discourage him, thinking of him only as an old acquaintance – until my former schoolmate Edith started teasing me, "Nu, Irene, you have a chaver" (friend). Right after that I sent him away.

Bucharest – "Strada Roma"

We left Arad after three days, taking a regularly scheduled train to Bucharest. For the next seven weeks our group stayed at a place called the Strada Roma, girls accommodated on the first floor and boys on the second floor. We hardly ate our entire stay there. About twice each week we had "mama liga", corn meal cooked in water. We could hardly buy food with our small allowance, just a few apples or halva. Local movie theaters, on the other hand, were quite affordable, and we took full advantage of this, going from one cinema to another.

Here in Bucharest I became good friends with Tzipora, a girl from Budapest. We spent many hours together, occasionally strolling in the company of two boys. Tzipora fell in love with one of them, but he felt nothing towards her. The other boy was so attracted to me that he asked me to become engaged to him, but I rejected his offer. One of the girls worked hard to persuade me not to become engaged to him, unaware of what had already happened. Later, on board the ship on the way to Palestine, this girl lay openly in his arms, kissing in gay abandon.

On the first of May, our Bnei Akiva group took part in a May Day Parade through the streets of Bucharest.

FIRST STEPS IN PALESTINE

Aliyah Bet: On Board the "Max Nordau"

Early the next morning, Friday, May 2, 1946, we left Bucharest, taking a train to the Romanian port city of Constanca – one step closer to Palestine. Sunny, pleasant weather greeted us.

We debarked the trains and went straight to board a ship already waiting for us at the harbor. One by one they called our names and everybody boarded the ship – except for two, a boy and me. The Bnei Akiva official told us we would probably have to return to Hungary now and make the trip to Palestine on another occasion. Worry and fear overtook me, hot tears inundating my eyes. Still, the prospect of going back home (at this point I was dreaming of immigrating with Isaac to the United States) filled me with at least some hope. But no, it was not to be. After a nerve-racking few moments that seemed like an eternity I was called to board the ship while the boy was instructed to return to Hungary.

Sadly, I stepped up to the waiting ship. Like all the other passengers, I received a bare-wood plank as my personal living quarters. To my right was an older lady who turned out to be a real witch. I was startled to discover that my neighbor to my left was a former schoolmate from Puspokladany, Edith's cousin, who had employed Edith to persuade me to go together with them to Eretz Israel.

Later in the journey I found out it was he who fought to have me come on board this ship, and occupy the small place next to him. Clearly, he had connections. All the passengers received minimal food rations of "stone dry" bread and water, sometimes even less than that. All the passengers, that is, except for a privileged few such as he. This boy shared his tasty privileged food with me – cold cut salami with fresh, hot rolls – it was very tasty.

About half way to our destination the boy asked me if I was ready to marry him as soon as we arrived in Palestine, or if I wished to wait until my mother could join us.

My expression apparently exposed my astonishment and dislike for this young man, although all I told him was that I have not thought about it yet. After this little episode he never spoke to me again. Even years later

when, in the company of my future husband, I greeted him at the wedding reception of his cousin Edith, he angrily turned his face away. Actually, I couldn't care less about his stupidity. Why should he be so upset with me? In Bergen-Belsen I had risked my life to bring some animal food, and shared this with our bunk neighbors. I never thought they owed me anything.

Aboard the ship I met a young man who grew up in a city where many of my relatives had lived before the Holocaust, so we spoke quite often about them. He also lent me a book by the author, Ady Endre. Sitting on the main deck one day, I accidentally overheard him conversing with some of his friends, informing them that he is about to visit his "chavera" (girlfriend). I wanted to make sure he was not referring to me, so I went to my place and pretended to sleep. I heard his footsteps, then he called my name several times. He received no answer, and crept away. I never saw him again, and didn't even get a chance to return his book.

The journey on board the ship named "Max Nordau", also known as Smyrna, lasted an exhausting twelve days, fraught with hunger and thirst. The trip to Palestine, still under the British Mandate, was in the framework of "Aliyah Bet". That is, our visas were for entry to a South American country, while our real intention was to enter Palestine secretly in small boats under cover of darkness.

May 12, 1946: Prisoners in our Homeland

Our plan failed when the British authorities detected us. As they seized our ship and slowly dragged it into the Haifa harbor, a newfound sense of elevation started to accompany me. We all crawled up to the main deck fervently singing Hativka, the Israel national anthem. Our ship stood in the harbor facing a big building, with the people in front of it lovingly pelting us with oranges and bananas so that we would have what to eat. Our date of arrival, the twelfth of May, 1946.

We boarded a bus and an armed British escort accompanied us on our half-hour journey to the Atlit detention camps. Again, we were prisoners. The bitter experience conjured memories of the Nazi guards at the concentration camp. We resided in wooden barracks, with separate barracks for men and women. The unusually hot weather was termed "hamsin" in Hebrew. Some of the girls lay half-naked on the cots, wearing

only thin underpants. They broke into ear-shattering shrieks each time one of the men would come to visit his wife.

The food at Atlit was rather simple, but at least we did not starve. We took turns in the kitchen peeling potatoes, etc.

Several Bnei Akiva representatives from nearby visited us a few times, advising us as to what we would do when we got out of Atlit, as most of the group had no place to go on their own. The main option was kibbutz, with teens to be sent to a farm, where they would study half the day and work the other half.

Sde Yaakov Youth Aliyah School – Our First Home in Palestine

The British released us less than three weeks after being taken to Atlit. I was part of a group of six girls taken to a private home on Mount Carmel, where a pleasant middle-aged couple entertained us. We stayed here from Thursday, taking strolls nearby in the neighborhood and gazing at the beautifully illuminated Haifa seaport. From above, innumerable bright stars cast their light, proudly creating a joyful sight for us. Here, a nineteen-year-old boy greeted us and prepared us for life in what would be our first home in Palestine, a farm at Sde Yaakov.

But the happiest time for me here was when I saw a man whom I didn't fully recognize approaching me. His face looked familiar, especially his kind hazel eyes which matched my mother. He enquired about his niece – me! So Uncle Loci took me and two other girls from the group to Haifa, where we enjoyed freshly baked cakes from a local bakery. The other girls continued to visit the Cave of the Prophet Elijah and other Haifa landmarks together with the Bnei Akiva guide, while I stayed to chat with my uncle. Loci invited me to visit him and his wife in Holon, near Tel Aviv. He also encouraged me to take full advantage of the opportunity I had to learn Hebrew at a Youth Aliyah school. After doing so, he suggested I live with him and his wife while I learn some trade. After breakfast the following morning, Loci gave me some pocket money and headed home. We thanked our host couple for their hospitality and headed to the Youth Aliyah boarding school at Sde Yaakov.

Writing Isaac

I wrote to Isaac, fulfilling my part of the agreement. In my first letter, I also asked him if my mother, brother and sister were still in the town. I had a premonition that they were also headed for Palestine. Indeed, Isaac's first letter back to me indicated that they would be leaving for Palestine soon after the coming Passover holiday.

While I kept my promise to write Isaac, I felt very awkward doing so, as this seemed not the appropriate thing for a religious girl to do. I also feared that he might show the letter to someone else and if I expressed my true feelings of love they would laugh at me. So I cautiously penned the letter, hiding any sentiments and avoiding any hints of flattery or friendliness. All my letters to Isaac took on a rigid, official tone. The communication took some time, as the only postal connections between Hungary and Palestine at the time were by means of ship.

Hot and Humid

The climate in my new, true mother country turned out to be brutally hot for me – particularly in the first few months following my arrival. My appetite deserted me and I frequently ran to drink cold water from the faucet by the cold-storage shed. I took showers almost hourly during the daytime to refresh my overheated body.

Here at Sde Yaakov, we often assembled in a large multipurpose hall which normally alternated between synagogue, dining room and lecture hall. One day the hall functioned as a sort of "slave market" (but not really), with local farmers selecting newcomers who would work for them. We were six girls on "display". The rest of the girls had to work from early morning until 1 pm six days per week, each day for a different farmer. I, however, had to work shifts in the kitchen. None of the farmers dared select me, as I later found out, fearing that I would be too delicate and lean for the rigorous work in the fields or as a housemaid.

Thus, we spent half the day working, and half the day studying. In addition to Hebrew language, we also learned general subjects like in high school.

The Mandatory British Authority still governed Palestine at this time. Every now and then our administrator assembled us in the multipurpose

hall for briefings on the political situation. These briefings stunned us, exacerbating the as-yet open mental wounds inflicted by the Nazis in the concentration camps. How could the British confiscate the few arms we Jews managed to scrape in our homeland to defend ourselves from vicious attacks by hostile Arabs, whose armories were not all regulated.

Uncle Loci Hosts Me on Vacation

Shortly after arriving at Sde Yaakov we were granted a vacation, which I used to visit my relatives: Uncle Loci, his wife Sara, and two cousins of mine – Miri and Lea. Those two girls were the only survivors from a family of nine souls, their parents and five brothers and sisters having perished in Auschwitz. With my minimal knowledge of Hebrew I still easily managed to find their home in the new, as yet small town of Holon. They all welcomed me very kindly, with cousin Lea making me a bathing suit so that I could join them for a swim in the Mediterranean Sea by Tel Aviv.

Uncle Loci, Miri and Lea worked during the day in Tel Aviv while I stayed at home with Aunt Sara, who had emigrated from Lithuania. With my minimal Hebrew we were hardly able to communicate.

Aunt Sara took naps in the afternoon, and I decided to go out one day and try to get a tan with my new bathing suit. Quite easily I located a desolate stretch of sand with some shrubbery along the outskirts of the as yet very small town of Holon. There I lay, face down, with my stomach rubbing the warm sand, enjoying a book. Soon, I fell into a sweet, deep sleep. I don't recall how long I slept before waking up abruptly to discover an Arab man just a couple footsteps away, his shoulder pack slung at his side and a long, thick staff in his hand. My taciturn expression and motionless body hid the intense fear which I felt.

The Arab man started speaking to me in Arabic. I didn't understand a word he said, but figured out he must be asking for instructions, so I just displayed my two empty palms to let him know that I could not be of assistance. He turned around after a short while; at long last I felt a sense of relief! Upon ascertaining that he was off the horizon I hastily put on my blouse and skirt and ran as fast as I could – without missing a beat – to my uncle's house.

My relatives were shocked to hear of my adventure and warned me to be more careful with my adventures, but I stubbornly continued going after

my impulses. Somehow, in some mysterious way, the great and unseen hand of the Almighty always came to the rescue!

I joined Miri several afternoons at the beach in Tel Aviv. As neither of us knew how to swim we just splashed away at the edge of the green-blue water. A group of people approached us, and one of them, a swim instructor, offered to give us a free swimming lesson. He seemed like a decent fellow and we gladly accepted his offer, thanking him at the end of the lesson.

My short vacation came to an end, and my relatives comforted me by promising that they would visit me as often as they could. With the exception of Aunt Sara, all of them did, in fact, come to visit me at Sde Yaakov. Miri visited me the most. She felt very good at Sde Yaakov. Also, Miri and Aunt Sara occasionally entered heated debates, prompting her to take a few days off every now and then to get away and enjoy the peace and tranquility she found with me at Sde Yaakov.

Anecdotes from Sde Yaakov

Following the much-needed vacation, I returned refreshed to Sde Yaakov and fully devoted myself to the new tasks that awaited me. We studied half the day, worked the other half, and received quazi-military training using sticks as guns. At a later point in time we also trained on real weapons, but that had to be done clandestinely, as the British Mandatory Government would not allow us to defend ourselves – even in the case of an Arab attack! I was sickened by this lack of justice; how long must the Jews be the persecuted scapegoats?

I spent free time doing homework in a study hall and progressed nicely. Some of the young men at Sde Yaakov made frequent visits to the hall as well, but they were less interested in doing homework and more interested in looking for potential brides amongst the newcomers. One of them proposed – of course, I rejected his appeal. He was very persistent and I had to rebuff him at least four times before he stopped pestering me. I heard that he was subsequently killed in action during Israel's War of Independence.

Some of the girls took up horseback riding as a pastime, courtesy of one of Sde Yaakov's young men. This fellow also proposed to me and I had to reject him several times. Once I, too, tried my hand with the horses.

Naively, with this young man's assistance I climbed up and sat atop a wild horse. Just as I grabbed the reins the horse started galloping wildly at full speed. With no experience and no instructions – I was dreadfully frightened. I had no idea how to stop this thing. I intended to slide off the horse's side, but it would not let me. Instead, the horse bucked me off; I flew over the horse's head, falling flat on my back with a loud thump. Horrified, my colleagues stood around me, then led me to my bed. I couldn't even answer them when they inquired as to my condition; the pain was unbearable at the time. Nobody thought to call a doctor or any of my teachers to see. I just lay down numbly for a long time, never ever wanting to ride a horse again!

Sde Yaakov, summer 1946. Just a short year after being freed from the Nazi concentration camps. We were still under the effects of our immense suffering at the hands of the Nazis, as the following incident underscores. Our teacher gently reprimanded us one day following complaints by local farmers that we were picking their fruit. But our brain-washed minds could not fully appreciate the new reality surrounding us. The next day I joined a group of young women who entered an orchard in broad daylight, picking and eating fruit to our heart's delight while the farmer sat silently on his front porch peering at this insolent bunch. The farmers eventually tired of complaining, and we, in turn, shortly stopped invading their orchards.

Under Pressure – My Ill-Advised Letter to Isaac

I continued to correspond with Isaac, my Hungarian sweetheart whom I expected to marry, and so I thought, whom had similar intentions. In his second or third letter he informed me that he joined a Bnei Akiva group preparing for life in Israel, so that he would be able to join me. He sent me a photo of him and I reciprocated. I maintained an "official", somewhat distanced tone in my letters, even though Isaac, on occasion, wrote warm, loving words which filled me with hope regarding our future.

I had rejected quite a few proposals on account of Isaac – some of which may have been rather suitable – and expected him to be more forthcoming as to his intentions. But he never really let me know if he had plans for a joint future, and I became bitter. I became more confused when he started signing his letters, "with love, your Isaac" – and later, "with love, your *chaver* (friend)". I started signing my letters likewise, even though I didn't fully understand what Isaac had in mind. I was not interested in a plain friendship, only in a serious fiancé! I so wanted to ask

my colleagues in Sde Yaakov as to the significance of the signature, *chaver*, but was too shy to do so. The subject occupied my thoughts much of the time.

I toyed around with the possibility of letting Isaac know that I had rejected some nice young men's proposal because of him, so as to induce him to clarify his intentions – but, somehow, I could not bring myself around to do so. As time went on with no strong hints, I began to lose hope and turned gloomy. Still, I was glad to receive his letters and continued to answer him the same day.

At Sde Yaakov I shared a room with ten girls – thus, there was no privacy. The frequent visitors we entertained only made things worse. Everyone knew what went on in everybody else's life.

Close friendships developed with some of my roommates, but not with Edith, even though she was a classmate of mine in Hungary since first grade. It seems that Edith was very lonely – and envious. Once, when I received a letter from Isaac, Edith smiled at me derisively. "Why are only you writing to Isaac," she said. "I would like to write him as well."

Her insolent suggestion greatly offended me. It was like the devil speaking through her mouth to steal what little happiness I had. But, after finishing my letter to Isaac, I made the unforgivable mistake of offering her to add some words to the letter. This turned out to be the beginning of the end of my correspondence – and friendship - with Isaac. Edith gladly accepted and wrote Isaac a few short lines. While Isaac did not relate to Edith in the next letter, Isaac surprised me by letting his friend, also named Isaac, add a few lines for me as well. I had always found this other Isaac repugnant, and recalled that whenever I had seen the two together it stirred revulsion in me – like a foreboding omen.

As usual, I answered the letter immediately. But now, the thought that the other Isaac would read my letter, and – no doubt – would ridicule me, greatly troubled me. Thus, I started drafting a somber, reserved reply. Making matters worse, one of the boys – whose advances I had rebuffed on several occasions – walked into the room and declared, "look everybody, Irene is writing a letter to her *chaver*." I felt utterly humiliated.

As I continued to write this letter, I recalled that while preparing for aliyah to Israel while still in Hungary, one of the group members received a letter

from Palestine and read it out loud to the entire group. So, I figured, Isaac will read my letter to a group of his friends as well, who will no doubt ridicule him. Extending my far-fetched trend of thought, and wishing to spare Isaac from facing this ridicule, I concocted a really stupid idea. I decided that I would write Isaac that I had a *chaver* here in Israel. So overcome by bitterness, the possibility that Isaac was the only one reading my letters did not occur to me.

I went ahead and wrote Isaac that I had a *chaver*. As I reviewed this crucial letter before sending it I pondered what would happen if Isaac wrongly understood that I was no longer interested in him. Being used to the persistence of the boys at Sde Yaakov, who would ask for my hand in marriage at least three or four times, I fooled myself into believing that Isaac would also make additional attempts. Then, I would need not worry anymore as to the seriousness of his intentions. Also, to make sure he answers this crucial letter, I asked him when he intends to come to Palestine. *But Isaac never answered this letter.* It didn't occur to me that the letter would hurt him so much that he would have nothing more to say to me.

Looking back, I realized just how inconsiderate I was in this cruel letter to Isaac. It must have been the doing of the devil, acting through the dark world that still possessed my subconscious in the aftermath of Bergen Belsen, where I was a brainwashed inmate.

After the usual amount of time passed and no letter from Isaac, I became deeply alarmed, tormented by grief. Weeks and months went by with no reply. I felt ill at ease, a biting pain at the pit of my stomach, or – perhaps – a twinge of conscience that haunted me for years to come.

Still, I was mad at Isaac for not writing back. I still hadn't realized just how offensive my letter was and expected him to do the honorable thing and at least let me know how he feels.

I recalled a story I heard in my childhood from one of the neighbor ladies. A boy and a girl vowed to marry, with a wildcat and a well in the field serving as their witnesses. The young man disregarded his promise and soon married another girl. His children became the victims of the broken promise, with the witnesses meting out the punishment. The young girl continued to wait for years. Alas, the man recalled his promise, and

sought the advice of a rabbi – he divorced his wife and married the girl who had continued to wait for him.

I, too, took my silent promise seriously, and felt a need to resolve my relationship with Isaac one way or another. I needed to clear my conscience before opening to other potential courtiers. I took a few steps towards the wood box that served as my writing desk, but then my mind conjured up the mocking smile of Isaac's friend as he laughs at my letter. I just couldn't bring myself to writing Isaac. I tried to quiet my conscience by shifting the blame to Isaac for not responding, but my conscience refused to calm down.

Alas, I decided that I would not get married until I hear that Isaac is married.

From time to time I would write poems to unburden my heart. But my eyes and face continued to mirror I feelings of distress, as my friends often reminded me.

Pondering My Future at Sde Yaakov

I studied diligently as the time passed by emptily. A new "Hagana" man, Arik, came to Sde Yaakov to train us to serve as the future freedom fighters of our homeland.

My uncle Loci invited me for the Passover holiday – and I gladly took him up. Loci informed me that my mother, brothers and sister would soon be coming to Israel. He suggested that I leave Sde Yaakov, reside with him and earn money to support my family – the sooner the better!

So even before the Passover holiday ended I went back to Sde Yaakov to pick up my few belongings and leave the place. But the director frightened me completely and dissuaded me from doing so. He reminded me how several months back I experienced severe pain in my lower right abdomen after lifting heavy dishes and told me that I likely am suffering from appendicitis! Why, then, should I burden my relatives, when I could receive excellent care while resting up at Sde Yaakov. Thank God, it later turned out that I did not have appendicitis.

An Unpleasant Encounter

Back at Sde Yaakov I would often go hunting for wildflowers in a nearby forest, sometimes with a companion, and sometimes just by myself. One afternoon I was so enamored by the springtime beauty of the pine forest, enjoying the solitude and the delight of picking flowers, that I didn't notice two Arab men quickly approaching. Suddenly, I saw them, each holding a big stick, garbed in long black robes and with a tired-looking donkey with a heavy load at their side.

What should I do now?

Run into the forest? No – the thought of doing that scared me even more.

I decided to just sit down where I was and gaze into the air with a distant stare, trying to present myself as a total idiot. The same heavenly force which helped me maintain my composure no doubt likewise deterred the two Arab men from attacking me. They passed by me so close by – I was really frightened. As they slowly walked off the horizon I picked a bouquet of some beautiful flowers, but this was the last time I dared undertake this dangerous adventure.

Stuck in the Aftermath of Isaac

I never really had much trust in people, and the aftermath of my relationship with Isaac further impinged upon my faith in others. Much as I missed the companionship of a young gentleman, and with my twentieth birthday approaching, I insensitively turned down any and all approaches.

One dark, starless evening I recall hearing soft footsteps following me at Sde Yaakov. "Please pardon me, Irene," a tender voice called out, "I would like to talk with you."

While I couldn't see the face, I recognized the voice. It was a gentle, handsome fellow. I should have accepted his request, but, instead, rapped out my staccato "no". Then I got angry, thinking that if someone wished to speak with me in the dark of the evening, his intentions must be likewise dark.

We continued dedicating ourselves with great ardor to military training in the summer of 1947. This included frequent midnight strolls amidst the

tombstones of a cemetery situated in a pine forest between Sde Yaakov and Kiryat Amal.

Next Stop Uncle Loci, Tel Aviv

In the early autumn several of my colleagues left Sde Yaakov, including my dear friend, Ada. Now I felt even lonelier and totally out of place, desperately wishing to leave. I contacted Uncle Loci, who was more than happy to host me, and told me to come as soon as I wanted. On a rainy Monday morning at the end of November I arrived at Loci's Tel Aviv apartment, a nice fellow named Pinchas helping me carry my few belongings.

Uncle Loci, his wife Sara and my cousin Lea greeted me warmly. But Sara turned out to be a real witch who made sure to make my life as miserable as possible so living under one roof with them was no bed of roses; more so it was the thorns!

My first Shabbat weekend with Loci, Lea invited me to join her and visit a friend of hers. From there, I walked over to my friend Ada, who lived with her married sister. With the severe shortage of living quarters which typified those days, Ada shared a room with three other people, in a three-room apartment which served three families – all of them sharing the same kitchen and bathroom!

United Nations Bestows Jewish Homeland

There we listened on the radio to the elevating news that the United Nations voted to bestow a homeland upon the homeless Jewish people, following two thousand years of persecution and humiliation, throughout which they fell prey to cruel, barbaric murder at the hands of many different nations. The British Mandatory Authority had to vacate Palestine by May 15, 1948.

But within twenty-four hours of the United Nations declaration our savage Arab neighbors intensified their murderous attacks on Jews. Not that they did not do so before, but now it became wholesale slaughter. Innocent Jewish blood was spilled freely in what was to become the old-new Jewish State. Even so, people celebrated the new State, singing and dancing the "hora" in the streets.

I, too, should have been excited – but I really wasn't. My senses were still frozen in the aftermath of suffering in the Nazi concentration camps.

I also had my own new beginning at Uncle Loci's apartment, where I shared a room with cousin Lea and enjoyed a comfortable single bed.

First Job – Apprentice Seamstress

Uncle Loci found me a job as an apprentice dressmaker. I received a very meager 30 pence per hour during the on-the-job training period. Loci was kind enough to provide housing rent-free, but informed me that I would have to cover my own living expenses, and should start saving for when my dear family arrives in Israel. I bought and prepared my own food during the six weekdays, and paid Loci for my share of the Shabbat meals: Friday night dinner, a piece of cake and cup of coffee for breakfast Saturday, and lunch on Saturday. It was also my responsibility, together with cousin Lea, to wash the dishes.

I was generally depressed at this time, as my employers, the Marton family from Transylvania, were not particularly friendly and did not really try to train me how to be a seamstress. Instead, they sent me on errands or had me doing household tasks such as washing their dirty dishes.

More Employment Adventures

Thankfully, this position turned out to be very short-term. But, as fate would have it, my next job was not much better. Within two weeks of my dismissal Loci found me a new position through his Hungarian "network". With a beaming face he informed me that I would now be a men's shirt maker. I almost felt hopeful, but my intuition predicted the contrary.

I presented myself to my new employer, the Zimroni family, also from Transylvania, on a bright Sunday morning. My work here consisted of sewing buttons on men's shirts, delivering the shirts to stores, and other assorted errands. About three times each week I hung to dry their baby laundry.

Some of the errands I ran for them were quite perilous. You never know when a hostile Arab might surprise you.

I also had an unsavory experience one morning on the way to work. A dirty old beggar approached me on Mazeh Street, calling out, "bubele-bubele," (baby-baby) as he unzipped his pants' fly. My blood boiled and I shouted that he back off before I call the police. He disappeared in an instant!

This job lasted less than a month. I still recall that gray Thursday afternoon when Mrs. Zimroni called me as I was about to leave and simply told me not to come back, as they have no more work for me.

I had managed my meager income quite efficiently and had saved enough money to buy myself a beautiful knit navy jacket and nice gray wool skirt. The new clothes aroused the suspicion of Aunt Sara, who viciously interrogated me to make sure that Loci did not give me any money. She took a pen and paper and started calculating all of my income and expenses – how much I spent on food and bus fare, and how much I paid for the jacket and skirt.

Now, out of work again, I was afraid to go home and encounter Sara's dark face, the darkness mirroring her dark, cruel soul. Great despair seized me as I got off the bus on the way to what was supposed to be home. I paced back and forth between the bus station and the apartment, bitter tears streaming from my eyes. All of a sudden someone stood before me and started talking to me. Uncle Loci got off the bus and asked me what I was doing pacing the streets. I could hardly control the crying but somehow managed to tell him the sad news that I had again been fired. He tried comforting me by saying that he would try to find me another job. In the meantime he would pay me to do most of the household laundry work (by hand), instead of the current laundress.

Loci managed to fish me a job within a few days, via the Hungarian Oleh organization. I worked three days per week, about three hours each day, as domestic help, dusting, sweeping and washing the floors. Occasionally I also did light laundry work. The family had another domestic helper whose job it was to cook. One day she offered me a glass of milk and slice of bread. The next day my employer reprimanded me for accepting the food and instructed me not to accept future offers of this type. In the eyes of many people they were a highly esteemed family, but I felt otherwise. Ironically, one of their daughters served as my own daughters' teacher several years later at the Beit Yaakov School in Tel Aviv.

But, again, the star of fortune turned her face away from me, the sun derisively smiled at me. I was fired after perhaps three weeks. Except for the time spent in Nazi concentration camps, the few months since leaving Sde Yaakov was the worst time in my life. I was so empty and disillusioned that I couldn't even shed a tear.

Suffering From Aunt Sara

As if that was not enough, I had Aunt Sara around to embitter my life. I recall one evening when she sent me to buy a pack of noodles. It didn't matter what type, she said. But when I returned she sent me back to change them. She did this at least four times, no doubt wishing to see me break down and cry. But I deprived her of this cruel joy, much as my blood boiled, and maintained a deadpan face. The storekeeper also felt for me and courteously exchanged the noodles each time.

Out of work and feeling quite bitter, I hardly left the house, staying all day under one roof with the witch, Aunt Sara. It was really awful. Relief only came in the late evening hours when Loci and Lea returned home.

Working at the Assis Juice Factory

Strangely enough, my situation took a wonderful turn for the better thanks to Aunt Sara's relatives, who visited one day and advised me to visit an employment agency on Bialik Street in Ramat Gan. They referred me to the "Assis" juice factory, about a forty minute walk from Loci's apartment. I started working with two other girls, with the wages much better than at my previous jobs.

One of us looked to make sure that cans coming off the conveyor belt had labels on them, someone else put the cans in a box, and the third girl stacked the boxes. We took turns doing the various tasks. Each week we had a different shift – morning, afternoon or night. We worked hard; I remember coming home one morning at eight o'clock and sleeping straight through the whole day until eleven p.m., when Aunt Sara woke me up for the next shift.

My co-workers were quite nice. We jointly made plans for Israel's nearing War of Independence, with the end of the British Mandate set for May 15, 1948. Alas, the Jewish homeland would be officially ours! We trained as first-aid nurses for Magen David Adom, where we could contribute to the

war effort without serving as soldiers. One of my co-workers, Toni, subsequently got engaged, her pending marriage exempting her from Magen David Adom service.

Still, the dark aftermath of my time in the concentration camps continued to depress me – as did the bitter disappointment following my break-up with Isaac. But more than anything else, I so missed my dear mother, my sister and brothers.

Mother!

Uncle Loci had never hinted just how soon my family was due to arrive. I returned from work one afternoon and rang the doorbell. Aunt Sara let me in. To my amazement, I saw my dear mother sitting at the table. I was so astonished that I could not move. Was this really my mother? I stood frozen for several moments, until my mother slowly approached me. "Oh, mom," I said, and we embraced warmly, as the hot tears streamed down our faces.

It was almost two years since I left my birthplace, and my mother aged considerably during this time. She looked well beyond her forty-eight years, the grief and sorrow of losing a husband and son at the hands of barbaric German and Hungarian Nazis weighing heavily upon her. These events acted to plow deep furrows upon my mother's sensitive face.

My sister Jolan and brother Bandi arrived in Israel together with my mother, but they were placed in a boarding school for the time-being, so as to attain basic Hebrew language skills as quickly as possible, and to make up compulsory school studies they missed during the Holocaust.

Family Apartment in Nachalat Ganim

Uncle Loci, with his tireless devotion, found us an apartment to rent in the Nachalat Ganim neighborhood and helped us secure a loan from the Hungarian oleh association – allowing us to pay the owner. The sum was 200 British Pounds, the official currency in Palestine at the time. The apartment consisted of one big living room, a very small kitchen, and an even smaller bathroom which we shared with three other families.

Still, we were more than happy. At long last we were able to live together, albeit as a broken family, as our father and oldest brother were murdered

by the Nazis. My brother Bela arrived shortly thereafter from Cyprus, where the British held him for almost a year for trying to "illegally" immigrate to Palestine. The British Authorities imposed the ridiculously low limit of 1,000 immigrants per month, at a time when countless refugees from the Holocaust sought to return to their old-new homeland. As soon as my brother Bela arrived he enlisted in the incipient Jewish army.

Each week, as I received my humble paycheck, I gave some money to Uncle Loci to repay part of our rental loan. One of my cousins also lived with us for a short while, and she also helped us with the rent. The small apartment gradually became more and more crowded. My sister Jolan refused to stay at the boarding school and joined us, and my brother Bandi also left his boarding school/yeshiva for good to stay with us. Whenever brother Bela – now referred to more often by his Hebrew name, Shlomo – received leave from the army, he likewise joined us. Thus, our one-room apartment typically housed five-six people.

I look back in amazement at how my skillful mother managed our home economy so incredibly from my meager earnings. We enjoyed a scrumptious supper each night, and my lunchbox was always filled with my favorite sandwiches. Later, my mother also worked as a baby sitter and cooked a bit as well, while continuing to manage the household needs.

Three times per week I participated in a Magen David Adom first aid training program, preparing myself to fulfill my patriotic duty when the need arises.

The War Effort

My stint at the Assis factory lasted three months; then I was laid off. This time, however, I didn't go even one day without a job. The employment agency found me a job right away, thanks to the severe labor shortage at the time. My new factory had turned all its production capabilities to the war effort. The job really exhausted me – eight to ten hours each day working under pressure in very hot surroundings!

We were now entrenched in the midst of a very real war, as the neighboring Arab countries joined forces with bands of local Palestinian

Arab terrorists in attacking the incipient Jewish State even before the official end of the British Mandate, May 18, 1948.

Frequent air raids posed a real danger to us. While the neighboring Arab countries had no limitations imposed on them, the British authorities confiscated all arms from the Jewish population – everything that they were able to put their filthy hands on, that is. Thus, the Israeli air force was initially composed of two small helicopters nicknamed "primis".

Thank goodness for Jewish ingenuity, which played a major role in the war. One talented inventor, named David, crafted a peculiar piece of artillery, appropriately enough nicknamed the "Davidka". While the accuracy of the mortar shells fired from the Davidka may have been wanting, each shell fired rendered a deafening sound which often scared away the enemy even before any clash took place.

But, alas, we experienced our share of loss and agony in Israel's War of Independence. Still, taking into account our inadequate arms, lack of trained forces and a Jewish population well under one million facing so many hostile Arab nations, Israel's victory in the war most certainly reflected heavenly intervention on our behalf.

We resided in an area which had several factories nearby, with production focused on the war effort. Thus, almost all of the enemy air raids were quite close to us.

I can still clearly recall one day when my mother came home from work around two p.m., with enemy planes dropping bombs all around her.

On another occasion, while I was at work, the air-raid siren sounded. Two hundred people rushed out of the building and scampered for cover, with enemy airplanes flying low and dropping their bombs. There was not enough room in the bomb shelter, and many of us ran to and fro in the adjacent orchard. With no place to hide I laid face down beneath one of the orange trees, covering my ears to protect them from the deafening noise and closing my eyes as I whispered the "Shma Yisrael" prayer – a Jew's last resort in times of great danger. "Hear oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." No one except the Almighty could protect us from the ferocious attack – were it not for Divine intervention they very easily could have killed us all.

Another satanic and unchallenged Arab air raid on the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station left utter devastation and wide-scale loss of human life.

In the meantime I finished my first-aid training. Once a week I served at the Magen David Adom station in Ramat Gan, and once every other week I served at a military first aid station. This station, located behind the front lines, was manned by a military doctor along with two or three Magen David Adom nurses. The station included sleeping quarters – one room for the doctor, another, with a private entrance, for the nurses. We treated the soldiers on-site when possible, referring more serious cases to hospitals.

Uncomfortable Encounters at the Military First Aid Station

I experienced more than my fair share of uncomfortable encounters serving at the military first aid station.

One of the army doctors, who was quite handsome, was often joined by his beautiful wife and young son. Once, when –in their presence – he foolishly tried to caress my face, I deflected his humiliating approach and yelled at him, "how about caressing your wife instead". Sure enough, my response quite offended him, and he never spoke to me again, even though we had still had to work together fairly often.

On another occasion I asked to for permission to speak with Uncle Loci, who was stationed with a combat unit nearby. The doctor gladly agreed, and walked over with me to the unit. A high-ranking officer greeted us at the gate and escorted us to the headquarters, from where I could speak with Loci by phone. During this short minute the two men conversed between them. From what I managed to hear I discerned that the officer asked the doctor if I was "open for suggestions". I couldn't hear what he answered, but he must have known that my behavior was strictly ethical and upright, in accord with my proper upbringing.

I felt ill at ease following this unasked for adventure, my blood boiling with anger. I maintained my composure and neither of these two rascals dared say a single word, but the atmosphere turned quite awkward. Alas, I managed a few words with Loci, who was greatly surprised to hear my voice, but by now my anticipation and excitement had evaporated...

The following day several soldiers came for minor medical attention. One of them, a tall and handsome religiously observant young man, started a conversation with me. We spoke about our broken families in the aftermath of the Holocaust, and planned to have his widowed father meet my widowed mother. But the conversation came to an abrupt end on account of my outdated conceptions. The young fellow sat down innocently beside me on the bench, leading me to jump up like an untamed tiger. I felt that this was the proper thing to do and really had no intention to offend him. On the contrary, I was already contemplating a nice friendship with him. It was too late when I realized how insulting my behavior was. I lost the prospect of new friendships for myself and for my mother, who, at the age of 48, was too young to remain a widow for the rest of her life. I know that she was interested in remarrying, as she allowed a neighbor to introduce her to a man – who turned out to be not to her liking.

One week later I was assigned to Wilhelmina, a former German colony right behind the front combat lines, whose former residents had all fled. We arrived on a hot summer Friday afternoon, with the staff composed of an army doctor, an army nurse, and three Magen David Adom nurses, including one male. This, my first up-close encounter with the horrors of full-scale fighting, was accompanied by incessant ear-splitting noise emanating from the Davidka positioned right in front of our makeshift station.

We operated out of a mansion, our medical facility consisting of a small treatment room and a larger room where injured soldiers lay on straw mattresses placed on the bare floor before returning to battle. We received strict orders not to leave our designated quarters within the mansion, all the more so not to go out of the mansion, for fear of activating land mines.

The male Magen David Adom nurse, a rather disreputable looking chap, made repeated attempts to court me with flattering come-ons such as, "you have the most beautiful, glistening eyes". But I never let such blarney get to me. Soon enough he realized how unwelcome his flattery was, so he stopped bothering me.

At any rate, our hands were full taking care of the wounded. We treated light injuries on site, as the doctor referred more serious cases to hospitals where they received the best treatment available at the time.

Late at night we were able to take naps in the large room where the wounded soldiers also slept, with the medical crew at the opposite side of the room. I had no intention to lie down in this mixed male-female room, so I sat down in the only armchair available. Seeing this, the other two Magen David Adom women kindly offered me to sleep between them. We rested fully dressed in the presence of about twenty people, but at least there was a reasonable distance – a meter or so – between us women and the nearest male. With the cannons blaring away we really didn't get much sleep.

The army doctor shamelessly took advantage of the situation, making advances on the other unmarried Magen David Adom nurse – and with tangible results; the two of them cuddled up to each other under a blanket. The male Magen David Adom nurse blatantly crept closer and closer to the military nurse, a modest and faithful married woman, until she finally got rid of him once and for all by yelling at him, "get away from me you pig".

Another unpleasant surprise awaited me at the break of dawn, in the person of that same army officer who one week before asked the army doctor about me. What a disgusting start to the new day! Both of us stood speechless staring at each other, until I plucked up enough courage to tell him just what I thought about him. I put him in a tight corner, but while his eyes may have reflected underlying rage he still managed to maintain his composure.

To the best of my recollection this was our last day of service behind the combat units. Thanks to the Almighty's kindly intervention our tiny army registered a speedy victory over the massive invading Arab armies.

Packing Cigarettes for the Bazarano Company

In the meantime, the State of Israel managed to secure new and advanced weapons from overseas, rendering all of us temporary workers at my factory superfluous. Once again I found my way to the employment agency on Bialik Street, Ramat Gan, where – without any difficulties – I received my latest work assignment, packing cigarettes for the Bazarano Company. I learned the job quickly thanks to my excellent trainer, a beautiful young lady named Pusha, whom I had worked with in the past for a short period of time. A few days later the manager from my previous

job asked that I return to work for him. While I was flattered, I had never left a position of my own volition, and I was quite happy with my new job, so I politely turned him down.

One scorching hot July day a platoon of armed soldiers stormed our factory without prior warning and herded all of the young men and unmarried women of military age into large trucks which waited outside. We were taken to a base nearby in Jaffa, where, one by one, we were required to produce documentation that we were not evading the draft. Except for Pusha, all of us had the necessary documentation on hand, so the army officials let us go. Pusha was released a little later when her parents presented her army exemption certificate.

Fearing for the Safety of My Soldier Brother

My brother Shlomo was now serving in the army, and we were very proud of him, especially when he wore his full army uniform. He usually received furloughs every other week – and if not he made sure to write us. My sister and I very much enjoyed walking along the streets of Ramat Gan beside him!

At some point in the month of August 1948, during an official ceasefire (which the Arabs did not abide by), it occurred to me that quite some time had passed without any letter from Shlomo. I was quite worried and upset. I was even more worried on account of my mother, who was shattered by the loss of our father and older brother Sandor at the hands of the bloody German and Hungarian Nazis. What if, God forbid, something happened to Shlomo? Is there anything I can do to help? What should I do?

In our Bible, there is a verse which says that the Almighty takes special care of widows and orphans. And, after much consternation, heavenly intervention came to my rescue, in the form of a good decision on my part.

Thursday afternoon, right after I finished work, I took the bus to the main post office in Tel Aviv, located on Judah Halevy Street, corner Allenby. I was quite nervous, and not at all certain of myself, especially as I had not consulted my family. Nonetheless, I formulated and dispatched a short telegram message to my brother, "Shlomo, come home, mother is ill."

I didn't bother updating anyone when I came home, but they found out soon enough when Shlomo came home the next day. Shlomo was astonished when he discovered my white lie, but we were quite relieved to have him back home.

My joy was tempered on this particular Shabbat, though, by an unexplained terrible feeling which gripped me, as if some ill omen was hovering in the air.

Shlomo returned to his army base early Sunday morning and I went off to work, where my colleagues informed me some disastrous news, almost an entire platoon of Israeli soldiers was wiped out by Syrian forces on Shabbat. Only five or six soldiers survived the treacherous attack, carried out under cover of the ceasefire agreement.

The following Friday afternoon my brother Shlomo came home for the weekend. He behaved somewhat strangely and hardly spoke to us on Friday night. On Shabbat, deeply shaken by grief, he informed us that it was his platoon that was ambushed the previous Shabbat. He added that he was given leave on account of the telegram I sent, and asked me to never again send such a telegram. Shlomo told us that savage Arab bandits positioned on a mountaintop in the Galilee fired upon a group of unarmed Israeli soldiers down below. While Israel miraculously emerged victorious in the war, there were some unfortunate and disastrous losses.

Another painful memory from the war involved two of our close neighbors, one of whom was on guard duty at an army post. Upon hearing suspicious enemy movements, this neighbor of ours fled his post instead of alerting his fellow soldiers as to the incipient danger. Exposed by this cowardly reaction, all of the soldiers at the post were killed by the savage Arab attack. One of the victims was another neighbor of ours, a middle-aged married father of two children. We could see the look of pain upon our cowardly neighbor's face after this attack.

Altalena

Around this time, during Israel's 1948 War of Independence, a Civil War nearly broke out in Israel. Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, fearful of losing his position, ordered his troops to open fire on the "Altalena", a ship full of armaments brought to Israel by political rival Menachem Begin, commander of the Etzel militia. The ship, with its valuable cargo, sank as

it approached Tel Aviv, and several Etzel fighters were killed. Many years later, Begin got his satisfaction when he was elected Prime Minister of Israel.

Trying to Get Rid of a Shabby Date

I made several acquaintances at my current work place. One of them, a young married woman named Aranka, expecting her first child, often sought my company. I could not figure out why she took such an interest in me – then she told me she was looking for a wife for her young brother-in-law. Aranka quite candidly related all of his virtues and faults. I must give Aranka credit for being so honest!

All of my friends who knew him warned me to stay away from him, but I succumbed to Aranka's persistence and agreed to meet her brother-in-law. Aranka then took it for granted that I would also marry him.

We met for the arranged date on a rainy afternoon after work. There he stood, a uniformed soldier over six feet tall with blonde hair and greenish-blue eyes. Still, he struck me as being quite shabby, unimpressive and disreputable. I was not in the least attracted to him. Yet on this first date he surprised me by asking me to marry him. I was too bashful to give me a straight answer, so I told him that anyone wishing to marry me must receive my mother's approval first. On our second date he came to our place so that my mother could meet him, and on our third date I told him that my mother did not approve.

I thought that would be enough, but this young man persisted. He asked me what **my** answer was. I kept silent, likewise believing that would discourage him. But this pushy person still did not get the message, kept waiting for me after work and showing up invited at my home. I lacked the courage to tell him straightforward to leave me alone, and, perhaps, I selfishly wished to maintain some sort of friendship with him. So – along with his sister-in-law – he kept pestering me and insisting that we set a date for marriage.

As I never gave him the slightest indication of consent, I was certain that there was no basis for him to believe that I would marry him. Yet he dared introduce me to his friends and relatives as his intended. I tried to further discourage him by flashing a look as irate as I could.

One day he invited me to attend the wedding of one of his best childhood friends, and came to pick me up. Although I was already twenty-one years old, I asked my mother's consent to join him, as I did not wish to cause her any pain. She gave a very definite "no", and I told the young man that he should attend the wedding without me. As I was really tired, I proceeded to take a cold shower and went straight to bed. My mother feared that I might try to sneak out the bedroom window (she was definitely wrong!), so she stood "on guard" outside the building. This insolent young man stood at the corner of our building waiting... He disrespectfully ignored my mother's calls for him to leave. It was midnight before he finally left and my poor, tired mother was able to go to sleep.

After we were acquainted for several months he gave me a gold necklace, and I returned the favor by giving him my own gold necklace. When my Uncle Loci caught site of my error he reprovved me with some humiliating words. I told the young man what my uncle had said and returned his necklace. Fortunately, he returned my necklace as well.

The more I got to know this fellow, the more I realized he was not for me.

Once when we went out for a stroll a stranger asked us for directions. When I started to answer him, my escort began shouting at me, as if I was a prisoner of his. After the stranger passed by my escort rebuked me for speaking to him. "Well", I thought to myself, "if this is how he behaves now, what should I expect from such a wild animal if I consent to marry him?" His behavior so shocked me that I didn't dare say a word.

My mother kept urging me to get rid of him and Uncle Loci promised to introduce me to nice young men who would be more to my liking. My friends likewise warned me not to continue the relationship. Some of them went so far as to lobby my mother against him. Sure enough, they were all correct about him!

At any rate, I hadn't the slightest feelings toward him and ultimately, at the end of the summer, worked up the courage to tell him that our relationship had come to an end. Upon hearing my words he dared suggest that if my mom did not want me to marry him, then we should kill ourselves. I still could not figure out why he could not understand that I had no desire to wed him. He was so depraved. When I started to date other men he

would lurk around the corner from my house – as I later found out – waiting for them with ill intentions. One of my neighbors had to resort to force to chase him away.

STARTING A NEW LIFE AS MRS. MUSKAL

My Beloved Isaac Marries

It was now the summer of 1949. When I came from work one day I found Shlomo Kolb – a childhood friend of my brother – visiting. He was the first person from my former hometown that I saw since leaving three years earlier, and my first question to him centered around my beloved Isaac. Shlomo informed me that his brother's wife introduced Isaac to her sister two years ago and that they had married (as I subsequently found out, they only married the following year).

This news stirred pain deep in my heart and soul, and I felt very uneasy. I had been trying to blot out the memories of Isaac these past three years, but only with partial success. My dormant guilty conscience suddenly roused. I again found myself mulling over the abrupt break of our correspondence, for which I could not come up with any satisfactory explanation, so in my mind I decided to pin the blame on Isaac. Still, I felt pangs of guilt, coupled with intense sadness, without being able to understand why.

It had been only two years since our correspondence stopped. Perhaps if I tried a bit harder I could have found what led to this break. But, as I discovered many years later, Divine Providence spared me from finding out the reason back then, as the truth would have only harmed me more as I began a new future.

My feelings took me for a roller-coaster ride. I started to feel some relief from my remorse, but then a feeling of deep distress possessed me, and then I felt that Isaac had offended me. My response – to again try and suppress my guilty conscience.

The issue troubled me for quite some time and I just couldn't reconcile myself to the idea that Isaac was already married, so I visited Shlomo's sister and asked her to tell me what *really* happened. But she related the same unpleasant tidings from my perspective – Isaac had married.

Free to Marry

Alas, I recalled my pledge not to marry before Isaac does so, so at least now I was free to get married myself.

Still, at this point in time I knew of nobody whom I desired as my future husband. I dated several sincere, upstanding young men – some of whom proposed with tear-filled eyes – but I had no feelings for any of them and refused all of the proposals. All the while, I witnessed many girl friends of mine marry men whom I found quite repugnant.

At times I second-guessed myself. Why aren't any of these suitors good enough for me? Why do I feel nothing for them? It took me years to realize my real problem – the suffering at the hands of the Nazis diffused my capacity to love.

After a while I became so desperate that I thought I would never marry. Only one matter kept me going, the desire to have a son and name him after my father, who was brutally murdered by Hungarian Nazis. I even toyed with the idea of marrying only to have a son, and then to get divorced.

Now or Never

Around 20 November, 1949, I had a date with a new man. Desperate, before I even met him I decided that enough is enough – either I would marry him, or I would cease my pursuit of marriage forever. Instead of marrying someone with no affection, I would pursue some professional career as a diversion.

As it happened, I did not have to look for a new career. I found this man quite likeable. We went out three times per week. On Monday and Thursday nights we would meet on Tel Aviv's Rothschild Blvd at 7 p.m. and stroll the city's main streets. Around 9:30 he would escort me to the bus station, as, in accord with my mom's strict orders, I had to be home by 10. On Saturdays he would take a long walk from his residence on Tel Aviv's Herzl Street to my place in Ramat Gan, Nachalat Ganim, Beth Shapira. On rare occasions we went to see a movie. I consistently found his company pleasant and we were never bored.

After we missed one of our regular Monday meetings, he told me on our next date that he had missed me. He asked me I had missed him too, but even though I did, in fact miss him, I was too proud to admit it. I simply told him that as I had visited my friends in Tel Aviv I had no time to think if

I missed him or not! At that point he turned serious and informed me that he was interested in a long-term relationship. I just kept silent.

I was somewhat concerned about this man's age. Before I met him, I asked Uncle Loci how old he was. I felt that I should marry someone who was four to six years older than myself – by no means more than that; as I was twenty-two, that meant that the man should be no older than twenty eight. Uncle Loci assured me that this man was twenty eight, and I had no reason not to believe him. On one of our dates the young man asked me how old he looked, and I told him that Uncle Loci had already told me that he was twenty eight. Now it was his turn to remain taciturn. How naïve I was to be so sure of his age; I wrongly understood his silence as a sign of ascent, and at this point he did not undertake to correct me as to his real age.

Proposal Accepted!

At the beginning of February 1950, he asked me to make an engagement party. I eagerly consented and we set a date. One day before the party he presented me with a gold watch and we went out for a short walk. For a fair amount of time we just walked silently side by side. Then he told me he needed to tell me something, and came out with the upsetting confession as to his true age – thirty two. But even before I had a chance to react he came out with more startling news: his identification card lists him as being born in 1910, which would have made him thirty nine years old.

To say that I was shocked is an understatement! I was angry and indignant, and felt like a real fool.

Frozen and totally speechless, bitter and upset with being misled, I initially considered breaking off the relationship and returning the gold watch. But then I recalled how I had made up my mind that this would be my final attempt at finding a husband; also, I was averse to humiliating him at this point. So I swallowed the anger and buried the pain deep in my innards. But instead of feeling warm happiness on the occasion of my engagement, I just felt cold pain. Time did help me overcome this pain, and the more I got to know him the more I appreciated him and enjoyed being with him.

So, at long last, I became a fiancé. We had a very nice engagement party at Uncle Loci's apartment. My mother was quite pleased with her future son-in-law. Besides my pent-up emotions, I felt quite content. It may not have been burning love, but – in a certain sense – it was much more precious than that.

At times I pondered how I could be certain that I really loved him. Perhaps, so I thought, the sign of true love would be when I could see through his eyes – so to say – deep into his soul, and sense his understanding, his love to me. After convincing myself that this was the correct method for discerning love, I felt utterly disappointed when I unsuccessfully attempted to look through his eyes and into his soul. In fact, during all the years we shared together he never let me penetrate his senses – the one exception being the day our second son was born. He put up some sort of defensive wall that prevented him from perceiving my deep feelings. Somehow, I managed to repress my feelings of rejection that came each time I tried looking through his eyes.

Our Wedding

All in all, our time together as fiancés went by happily. We found a place to rent and set the date of our marriage: June 15, 1950. On that day I became the devoted wife of Samuel Sandor Muskal, and he became my devoted husband.

The fledgling State of Israel experienced a shortage of foods at this time; thus it was difficult to organize large dinner. Still, we managed to arrange a varied menu with plentiful food for over 200 guests.

Uncle Loci made it clear that I was responsible for preparing the food and arranging the tables for my wedding. He did not bother to have anyone help me. Thus, I spent the morning of my wedding day arranging tables. Alas, my brother Shlomo and good friend Gopi came to my rescue at 1 p.m., when they sent me home and undertook to finish the rest of the work. I hardly had time to prepare myself, but thank God we had a really nice wedding.

Although I had a good marriage and I was pleased with my life-mate, I was never able to fully overcome the lingering feelings of pain from my experiences in the Nazi concentration camps, even on joyous occasions such as my wedding. The suffering and fear left in the aftermath kept

paralyzing me. The kind-hearted United States army may have liberated us outwardly, but our inner world left us captives of the Nazi reign. The invisible shackles never let me react as I should to the sunshine that tried to penetrate my soul, never let me again fully grasp what happiness meant.

In accord with Jewish custom, family and friends of newlywed couples hold small parties, "Sheva Brachot" for them each night for a week. Unfortunately, we had nobody who could thus honor us, so my fine groom organized the parties himself, inviting ten people each night to bless us.

I took a week's vacation from my workplace, and my husband stayed home with me a couple days as well. We hosted some visitors and visited some relatives.

A Surprise "Gift" From My Husband

My husband surprised me a few days after the wedding by handing me a rag and a small can of cleaning fluid, and ordering me to clean the door handles. I felt so humiliated, but the shock left me speechless and I just did what he said. I could not understand his motives; some time later he told me that while he was quite fond of me, he was afraid that I would become lazy. I could not figure out why – I was rather lean and nimble. Otherwise he was kind and good to me, and called me by a pet name.

As for me – I was determined to win and merit his love, and was totally devoted to him. In accord with my husband's wishes, I quit my job shortly after our wedding. But that did not mean that I was not working; my husband brought me work from his weaving factory – cutting towels, cleaning and folding them, and packaging them for delivery to stores.

Our First Child, Tzivia

As I grew heavy carrying our first child, the work bothered me, but I never complained. Within then months of our wedding the Almighty blessed us with a girl, Tzivia, named after my husband's late mother.

I quite clearly remember the day I came home from the hospital with Tzivia – it marked the first time since our suffering in the concentration camps that I was able to sense at least some joy in my dark world. Alas,

we were now a full-fledged family! Still, beneath the surface the pent-up pain remained.

As soon as I came from the hospital I came down with a high fever of 102 degrees. My mother came to visit me – something which she rarely did.

Being a new mother kept me busy twenty-fours a day, and my husband no longer brought me work home. My husband also helped quite a bit with the baby. He disagreed with my mother's advice not to change the baby's diaper as soon as she wets. Even at night he was ready to get up every half hour to change Tzivia's diaper if she cried. And, I have to admit, he was much more skilled than I was at changing diapers. He continued this devoted treatment with all five of our children.

Every day I went for a walk with our baby, with Samuel joining us on Sabbath Days and holidays. It was a must to take the baby out for fresh air, as our rented apartment was on the top floor of a two-story building, the unbearable heat pounding us until midnight from early Spring until late Fall. The two years we spent in that apartment was like dwelling in an inferno.

From early babyhood, Tzivia suffered from recurring throat infection, and before her second birthday she developed pneumonia for the first time.

My husband's unmarried older brother came to visit us almost every day, every Sabbath Day and most holidays. It was a challenge for me to find private corners in our small apartment to breast-feed Tzivia. Lacking the necessary privacy, I often times to cover myself and Tzivia's face with a light towel.

Baby Tzivia developed very quickly, as did all of our children. Before reaching six months all had their first two lower teeth and were able to sit, and by seven months they were able to stand.

Tzivia made us very happy on her first birthday, as she walked unassisted for the first time. Child number two Shoshana was even quicker, walking at the first time at ten months old, and our three other children, Sara, Yitzchak and David Joseph, walked at eleven months.

By the time they were ten months old all of our children had gone beyond babbling and were uttering a few words quite clearly, and all spoke quite

intelligibly by eighteen months. Our youngest child, David Joseph uttered a complete sentence at ten months old, "here you are mom". He always demanded company, and even when he slept someone had to be close by his bedside.

Since I learned that a child develops best during their sleep in the hours before midnight, I decided to put baby Tzivia to sleep each night between six and seven p.m., which I saw that my neighbors did likewise with their baby. Tzivia would lie quietly with her eyes closed, but as soon as my husband entered the house – lo and behold – she would stand up impatiently in her crib, her eyes beaming radiantly to greet Samuel. Samuel would take her out of the crib and play with her, father and daughter both disregarding my vain plea that a ten-month old child should sleep at this hour.

One clear and cool morning Tzivia, who was hardly one year old at the time, alarmed me when she started to suddenly cry, and would not respond when I appealed to her to get up off the floor. She just kept crying and lying on the same spot on the floor. I decided to rush her to the doctor, but as soon as I came with her coat she leaped up and smiled joyfully. Apparently, her crying was a call for me to take her outside to play with her friends. From then on, I made sure to take her out to play every morning.

Welcoming Our Second Child, Shoshana

In the summer of 1952 my husband was under medical treatment for anemia (???), and was very weak. Thus, I took over some of his chores, including late nightly purchase and haul of ice blocks to fill our ice box – we did not yet have an electric refrigerator. On weekdays we would buy half a block of ice, and on Fridays a whole block. Compounding the matter, we had to wait in long lines to purchase the ice.

With our second child due about three weeks hence, I arrived home before a bit before dawn on July 25, carrying a heavy block of ice up to our second floor apartment. It was not easy, but I simply wouldn't allow my weak husband to do it!

Totally exhausted, I went to bed and immediately fell into a deep sleep. But the slumber didn't last very long, as I woke up with severe pains, and discovered that I was bleeding. My husband rushed to bring our family

doctor, who examined me and instructed me to stay in bed until the afternoon, and then to go to the hospital. He added that I would probably give birth during the night.

Sure enough our second child, Shoshana, was born at 2:30 a.m., July 26, 1952. On this historic date King Farouk of Egypt was robbed of his kingdom and driven out of his homeland. Shoshana weighed in at 3.200 kilograms. I had naively thought that as we already had a girl our second child must be a boy, and was somewhat disappointed. But the disappointment lasted only a short while and my deep love for her awoke when the nurse brought her to my bed so that I may breastfeed her.

When we came home we placed Shoshana in Tzivia's baby carriage. Apparently, this did not amuse Tzivia. She stood by the carriage one day and asserted, "this is mine", as she tried to overturn it with Shoshana inside. Luckily, she did not have enough strength to do so. We tried to explain to Tzivia that she must not do such things, and concurrently made sure to keep a close watch on our children.

For sleep, we moved Tzivia to a big bed, with Shoshana inheriting her crib. We only used the carriage to take the babies for strolls outside.

Tzivia kept me quite busy during the fifteen months that she was our only child. Now, I had the two of them to take care of. Somehow I learned quite quickly how to care for the two of them simultaneously, and even had enough free time to take them for frequent walks outside to breathe fresh air.

Samuel provided me with a helper three times each week to help wash the babies' laundry and clean our small flat, allowing me to regain some strength. Unfortunately, I was not wise enough to appreciate this. It seemed to me that the cleaning lady worked slowly in order to earn more money – I recalled how quickly I had worked as a factory employee and found her pace unsatisfactory. This angered me, and I made the ill-considered decision to fire her. She threatened to complain to my husband, but I stood firm and she left the job for good. But I really missed having a helper after that. The heavy workload made me weaker, but I was too proud to tell my husband. I just suffered in silence.

Having another child in the family was so good for me. Tzivia frequently suffered from throat infections accompanied by high fever, leading me to worry and to feel sad. But, alas, I recall an occasion when I took care of my gloomy, sick child, when suddenly the smiling face of Shoshana caught my eye and helped energize me. Now, forty years later, Shoshana's vivid smile still warms me up.

I recall another occasion when I brought Tzivia, who was almost two years old, her daily portion of fruit and cheese; it usually took her about an hour to finish eating this. But, on this day, she refused to eat, so I went with the bowl of food towards Shoshana. Seeing that, Tzivia called me back and finished the meal in record time!

New Apartment in Tel Aviv

Our third child was now on the way to be born. Shortly after the Passover holiday my husband bought an apartment in Tel Aviv's religious Kiryat Shalom neighborhood, 5 Shachal Street, Shikun Mizrachi. The apartment was near his workplace.

Sam told me that as we now lived in a religious neighborhood, things would be better for socially. While his assessment was correct initially, I soon experienced some difficulties. Our next door neighbor made a habit of dropping in every morning, reporting the latest gossip to me. Then, she would barge back in around noon, when Sam would nap on the sofa, and repeat the same gossip to him in Yiddish – doing so as she stood next to the sofa, her legs often rubbing against his torso. This scene – compounded by their speaking Yiddish, a language which I did not understand – made me feel humiliated. But my protests did not seem to bother them. I also told them that since returning from the concentration camps I felt very ill at ease when people spoke Yiddish, which was very similar to German; hearing the language aroused pent up pain and awakened deep sores. Still, they insensitively continued to disregard my pleas.

This neighbor felt very much at home with us, so much so that she placed her two-year-old corpulent and spoiled brat of a child in the crib beside ten-month-old Shoshana, without even asking our permission. She gave her brat a metallic bell to play with, and he soon hit Shoshana on the forehead with it. I angrily took him out of the crib and never let him back in, much as my neighbor asked.

Baby Shoshana decided herself when to stop nursing. At the same time she also refused to let me feed her with any other food, much as I tried to give her a bottle or feed her with a spoon. She stubbornly tightened her well-rounded lips, leaving me helpless against the whims of a small child. Acting out of despair, I allowed her to feed herself. Lo and behold – the strategy worked. Shoshana would clutch a chicken leg, biscuit or other food, and consume them with great relish. Still, it was difficult for me to see her not getting the proper nourishment.

Already heavy with our third child, I shed many tears on account of Shoshana, who also frequently suffered from diarrhea and had sores on her earlobes. For the latter ailment the doctor prescribed Vitamin C, which seemed to help and she gradually ate better. She was a very sweet and remarkably bright child, as were all of our children – thank God.

Welcome Baby Sara

Our number three daughter, Sara, was born October 15, 1953. She was a nice big baby, weighing in at over 3 kilograms. The day I came home from the hospital our next door neighbor came in and – instead of congratulating me – laughed at me and sarcastically remarked, "nu, you have three girls now".

"So what," I told her. "They are my children; I love them, and I will love them all even if I have ten girls." I added that I would not wish to have boys like hers!

Acting on the suggestion of one of our neighbors, my husband hired someone to help me every day with the housework and with the children. But I soon found fault with how she worked, so my husband brought a sewing machine home for her to do work for his textile factory, in addition to helping me with the housework.

Baby Sara behaved well and developed nicely. She was an easy child with big, beautiful, brownish-green eyes. For the first three months all of her nourishment came from breast-feeding, and I breast-fed her to some extent until she was eleven months old.

Now I had three sweet girls, and I yearned with all my heart to have a boy as well. I fervently prayed to the Almighty that he grant my request.

Subsequently, when I again became heavy with a child and visited our family doctor, I naively asked him if – as I have three girls – there was any chance that this time it would be a boy. He didn't say anything, only gazed at me in amazement and smiled. I felt embarrassed and silly; should have known better than to ask such questions.

Our First Son, Isaac

On the beautiful, sunny morning of May 18, 1955, I put my three little girls by the kitchen table and fed them breakfast. Then, as my husband returned home from the morning service at the synagogue, I told him to urgently order a cab to take me to the hospital maternity ward. I was lucky this time to have a kind and devoted midwife assist in the birth. I can't recall her name, only that she was of Iraqi origin. She took very good care of me as I delivered our first son, Isaac. Even though Isaac was quite big, weighing four kilograms at birth, the nurse did not cut me and I had no tear because of her devotion. She made me real proud when she declared, "you just gave birth to a beautiful boy". This was the only time I did not suffer from any tears, as the other midwives who assisted in my births did not care so much.

Now I felt a sense of great relief and thanked the Almighty. At long last, one of my heart's desires had been fulfilled. After three girls I had my first son. Just now I felt I was a real mother. I was spiritually uplifted and now felt self confident.